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RED SPUR RALPH, THE TEXAN.

BY C. DUNNING CLARK.



"HYAR'S YER UNTAMED JAGGER!" YELLED THE HUNTER WHO HAD BEEN CHASED, WHIRLING HIS RIFLE BY THE MUZZLE. "CL'AR THE WAY FUR THE BIG BUFFLER OF THE RANG. S! HOOPEE!"

Red Spur Ralph, the Texan; OR, THE YOUNG MUSTANGERS.

A Tale of Adventure on the Far Texan
Border.

BY C. DUNNING CLARK,
AUTHOR OF "CRUISE OF THE FLYAWAY," "THE
FLYAWAY AFLOAT," "RED RIVER ROVERS,"
"WALT FERGUSON'S CRUISE," "CAP-
TAIN RALPH," "THE YOUNG
LAND-LUBBER," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE YOUNG RANGERS—CHASED BY MEXICANS—
A GALLANT CHARGE.

A PARTY of twenty-five young men were encamped on a prairie in the western part of Texas. They had corraled their horses in the shelter of a *motte*, as clumps of timber are designated upon the Texan plains, and were enjoying their evening meal with a gusto which only a long ride could impart.

We have said that they were young men, but it might also be said that the greater portion of them were mere boys, and the oldest among them could not have been more than twenty-five.

They wore generally the garb in vogue upon the western plains at that time—buckskins, heavy riding-boots and broad sombreros. Each had his rifle lying beside him, and, belted at the waist, the weapon which has become national in the United States—the bowie. A row of saddles could be seen under the trees, each with a lariat coiled at the saddle-bow, and all their appointments were perfect. They were fresh, young, hardy-looking fellows and were evidently well accustomed to life on the prairie and perfectly hardened to danger.

It is only in the West, where men mature early, that such a scene as this would be possible; but the young men of Texas were trained from youth up to active outdoor life and were especially expert in horsemanship and the use of weapons. A boy who could not ride and shoot well would have been regarded as an anomaly in the Lone Star State.

"Take care, Garryowen!" warned one of the boys, a slenderly-built but sinewy young fellow, perhaps eighteen years of age; "you'll burst yourself next thing you know."

"My stomach will bear a dale av tinsion," replied the lad known as Garryowen, with a strong Irish accent. "Sure, give me pinty av venison ribs, an' be all the power, I'm there!"

"Yes, you are pretty sure to be there as long as the venison holds out," declared another of the lads, laughing. "But there is another day coming, Garry, so hold yourself in."

"Maybe when the other day comes there won't be any venison steaks to the fore," reminded Garryowen. "I'd like a bit av a row, though, just to settle me stomach."

"That's the Irish of it," exclaimed a young

man who appeared to be leader of the party. "Do you know how I came to enlist Garry? Well, it was down at Galveston, and he'd got into a row with a big hulking Greaser, and, as sure as you live, if I hadn't pulled Garry off him, he'd have made cold meat of the Greaser then and there. So I thought he'd do for me and I bought him an outfit—for he was down on his luck bad; and I've never been sorry for it. For I tell you, boys, if Garry makes a famine when the meat is roasted, he is always ready when the work comes on—more so than some of you chaps who laugh at him."

"Good enough, Captain Dick," cried the boy who had spoken first. "You mustn't think because I laugh at Garry I don't like him, because he's true blue when it is time to quit fooling and get right down to business. What are you looking at, Weasel?"

One of the lads, a wiry fellow with an Indian cast of features, had half risen from the grass and was gazing across the prairie. This boy had a remarkably brilliant pair of eyes, and had taken his nickname from his peculiar faculties as a trailer. He made no answer, but stepping forward a little, shaded his eyes with his hands and bent his gaze upon the place where sky and prairie seemed to meet. Then he turned to Richard Merry, who was leader of the party.

"Something wrong there, Cap," he declared. "There's a man riding at full speed and a party after him."

"Saddle up, boys," cried Merry, as he sprung to his own horse. "Maybe we'll have to take a hand here."

"It's the hand of Providence, and don't you forget to remember it," exclaimed Clarrie Lee, the boy who had been laughing at Garryowen. "Garry wanted something to settle that big supper—"

"Less jaw," commanded Richard, sternly. "Saddle up and lead your horses behind the *motte*. Give your mouth a holiday, Clarrie."

The boys obeyed promptly and not a word more was spoken. It was plain that they were accustomed to obedience, for not one of them seemed to dream of refusing to obey orders. The saddles were quickly in place and the horses led out of sight behind the *motte*, and throwing his bridle to Garry, the captain ran in among the trees and cast a quick glance across the broad undulating expanse.

"Just in time, by Jove," he muttered.

Perhaps three miles away, coming on at a hard gallop, looking over his shoulder at his pursuers now and then, rode a single horseman. There was an easy grace about his riding which took the heart of Dick Merry, who was raised in Kentucky, the State—

"Where every man is half a horse
And half an alligator"—

the State which in that day sent out more adventurers than any one in the Union. So the young man was already more than half disposed to favor the fugitive because he rode well and because the horsemen who thundered on in the rear were of the race which the bordermen hate, Mexicans. The horseman was heading for the *motte*, perhaps with the idea that once in its shelter he could make a fight, for it was plain that the beast he bestrode had been hard

pressed and could not keep up the pace much longer.

Nearer and nearer he came and Dick made out a man in greasy buckskins, a hunter and prairie man, clear through and his heart leaped up in his bosom with the desire to spring to his aid. Acting on the impulse, he ran back into the cover and made signal to the boys to mount. They did so without noise and sat like statues in the saddle, waiting for orders. Garryowen was trembling with the desire for battle and felt the impulse strong upon him to drop the captain's bridle and rush to the aid of the coming hunter. The beat of hoofs sounded louder and then the hunted man dashed into the wood and his tired horse stumbled and fell upon his knees. The next moment Captain Dick was beside the fugitive who half drew his bowie and stood ready for a fight, but as he saw the manly face of the young Texan he dropped his knife and extended his hand instead.

"Glad to see yer, pard," he muttered in a low voice. "Shake a fin."

The two silently clasped hands, and then, dragging his tired horse to his feet, the hunter led him further into the *motte* and released him. The two quickly pressed on and as he saw the strong party of young hunters sitting in their saddles, the fugitive brought his hand down upon his knee with a resounding slap.

"Pards," he whispered, "go for them Greasers p'izen; ef you love me, go, and I will love yer like brothers."

"Keep quiet, stranger," replied Captain Dick, as he swung himself into the saddle. "How many may they be?"

"Six," replied the hunter. "Wake 'em up lively, my sons; promise me this and I die happy."

"Here's a mate for you, Garry," chuckled Clarrie Lee. "His jaw is hung on a pivot and wags all day. Won't the captain ever give the orders?"

"Silence in the ranks. Now, lads, we are going to take these Greasers alive, mind you. Hit as hard as you like, but no shooting. Clarrie, lead out the five next you from the south end of the *motte* as they pass and take them in the rear. Knock down and drag out—that's the orders. Away you go."

By this time the Mexicans were within a hundred paces of the trees, coming on at a stretching gallop, looking warlike enough in their gaudy trappings, slashed trowsers and scarlet cloaks, and thirsting for the blood of the single man they thought at their mercy.

Suddenly they heard a ringing cheer and out in front of them dashed a large party of horsemen, with a footman running beside them and keeping pace with the horses. They knew him well enough, and knew, too, the horsemen who rode with him—the dreaded rangers of the Texan plains—for it made no difference to them that the rangers were young, for they were of the blood of the men who had often met them ten to one and beaten them in fair fight. They drew bridle as if by one impulse, and firing a single volley from their escopetes, the bullets from which whistled harmlessly over the heads of the riders, turned to fly, when to their horror there came dashing down upon their rear six

more of these wild young prairie men, yelling like demons.

Before they could turn again these were upon them, knocking them right and left with their pistol butts, but drawing no blood. Then up dashed the others, Garryowen shouting like a demon.

"Whoop! L'ave the way, ye divils!"

When in a corner, and there is nothing else to do, even a Mexican will fight, and they drew their long machetes and closing in, braced themselves to meet the shock.

"Hyar's yer untamed jagger!" yelled the hunter who had been chased, whirling his rifle by the muzzle. "Cl'ar the way fur the big bull buffler of the ranges! Hoopee!"

And he hurled himself alone upon the little knot of Mexicans, with the fury of a tiger.

CHAPTER II.

THE BATTLE WON—BORDER JUSTICE—RAINBOW RUBE JOINS THE BAND.

BEFORE any one could lift a hand the long rifle swept the air twice, and two of the Mexican saddles were empty; but ere he could strike again the young rangers were upon them and in the twinkling of an eye the Mexicans were down, three of them never to rise again, and the rangers, scarcely breathing hard, were securing the horses, which they regarded as their lawful prey.

They now turned to look at their new friend who had thrown the butt of his long rifle to the ground and was looking at them with a quizzical sort of smile.

He had a hard, weather-beaten face, and his buckskins were greasy and smoke-begrimed, as if he had seen service. His face was angular and his eyes black and piercing.

"Recken I'd better interduce myself so 'at you'll know me ag'in, pards," he said, quietly. "Rainbow Rube is my handle; mout be you've heard of me."

The boys pressed forward with shouts of delight and gave him a hearty welcome, for Rainbow Rube was one of the best known hunters upon the Rio Grande border. A whimsical, careless sort of fellow, who lived by his rifle and took delight in risking his life against big odds as he had done to-day.

"Glad to see ye, lads," he declared, shaking hands heartily all round. "Reckon ef ye hadn't turned up jest ez ye did, I'd 'a' bin rubbed out; I would, fer a fact. Mout 'a' sent two or three of them Greasers to Kingdom Come, per'aps, but they'd 'a' wiped me out fin'ly. Now who be you?"

"Dick Merry's Rangers," replied the captain.

"Oho! you be mustangers, hey?"

"That's the idea," answered Merry.

"Then I'm sort o' glad I've met ye. Had a notion I'd like to jine, fur I do like mustangin', I tell ye! But, mout be you don't want a new pard?"

"Don't run away with that notion, Rainbow," said the captain, eagerly. "If there's a man on the plains who knows mustang work, you're the very chap. You come with us and take a regular share and we'll thank you."

"Thet's my venison," averred Rube, gravely. "Shake on it, pard. I've marked down the

biggest drove of mustangs you ever see, an' some of the loveliest stallions—oh Lord! It makes my mouth water jest to think of it. An' ef we hev any luck an' take a drove down to San Antonio, we'll jest rake in the ducats hand over fist. But say; what's to be did with these yer Greasers; they ain't no use to me. Reckon I'd better sculp 'em, maybe."

"Hold on, pard," exclaimed the young captain, laughing; "we can't have that, you know. You've laid out three of them now, I'm afraid."

"Small loss, durn 'em. See yer; it won't do to take and coddle them Greasers, I tell yer. Thar ain't no use talkin', the best you kin do with 'em is to sculp 'em."

"I've got a better use for them than that, replied Merry. "How did they come to get after you?"

"Jest from pure cussedness, blame 'em. They was part of a gang that used to run over from across the Rio and steal my traps, an' mout be I've rubbed out a few of the cusses in my time; anyhow, they met me on the parary, an' tuk arter me, an' seein' my hoss Benzine had wrenched his knee they hed me foul. Thar's three more of the cusses layin' round loose on the grass back thar on the trail, an' ef the hoss had bin all right I don't reckon but I'd 'a' fixed the rest. But what's the program, Cap?"

"Give them a basting with the end of a lariat and let them go with a warning," was the answer.

"'Tain't my way of usin' Greasers, thet's all I've got to say," grumbled Rube. "Howsumever, hyar's one I'll baste myself. He's Odo Velasquez's leftenant, he is, an' I've reckoned to set his flint fur him some day. Git up hyar, durn ye."

He caught one of the Mexicans by the shoulder and dragged him to his feet, and the man gave him such a look of devilish malice that the hunter involuntarily dropped his hand upon the handle of his knife.

"It's foolin' away the gifts of Providence to let you go, Gil Perez," he declared. "See yer; let's make 'em run a gantlet, boys."

The idea pleased the young rangers and they put themselves in line, leaving a space between wide enough to allow full sweep for the lariats. The Mexicans understood what was required of them and knew the character of the Texans well enough to be certain that if they ran the gantlet fairly they would be allowed to go. Rainbow Rube elected himself starter and took the Mexicans out one at a time, released his hands and feet and started him with a swashing blow from his own lariat. The first Mexican, a swarthy native of Monterey, sprung away from the powerful arm of the Texan with a yell of pain, and nerving himself for the effort, darted between the double line waiting for him. The rawhide ropes rattled a lively tune upon his broad back as he darted through, taking a farewell blow from Garryowen which nearly lifted him from his feet, and he sped away like the wind, never stopping to look behind him.

"Let him run," cried Captain Dick. "He has a lesson which he will not soon forget. Send along another, Rube."

The second man was a wily fellow and as he

sprung into the line he ran in so close to one side that the blows they gave him failed to have much effect, and he was so far away from the others that the blows hardly reached him, and before they had time to realize the trick he was through the line and making rapid time after the first fellow, who was speeding away in the distance.

Gil Perez was now led forward. He was a finely-built, handsome fellow, with a drooping mustache and flowing dark hair. He folded his arms and refused to move.

"Senor Captain," he said, quietly, "I care nothing for what you do to yonder ladrones—they are used to it, and I have flogged them myself upon occasions. But I tell you now that you may beat me to death where I stand, but I will not run your gantlet at any price. I would sooner die."

"I reckon it's ther best way," cried Rube, drawing a pistol and taking a step forward. He really intended to shoot the Mexican, but Dick stepped forward and threw up his hand.

"None of that, Rube," he insisted. "This is not one of the ordinary herd, and I am going to take it on myself to let him go free."

"Durned ef I like it, Cap," growled Rube. "You promised me this critter."

"I did not promise to allow you to murder him in cold blood. Give up your weapons and go, Senor Perez."

"It's durned foolishness, Cap," Rube persisted. "This yer is the meanest skunk in Odo Velasquez's gang, an' some time you'll be durned sorry ef you let him run."

"I take the chances. Only remember, senor, if you do us any harm after I allow you to go, I will not spare you again."

"I make no promises," replied the vindictive Mexican. "If you let me go, you do it on your own responsibility, and I am not to blame."

"I understand that," was the quiet answer. "Merry's Rangers are not afraid of all the Greasers on the Rio Grande, and we have no time to waste. Get out of this."

The Mexican looked fixedly at each member of the Rangers, drew his scrape over his shoulders and stalked quietly away, and the party returned to the *motte*, leading the captured horses with them. Rube was rather sullen for a moment, as he considered that he had been defrauded of his revenge, but the feeling soon passed away.

"Will you take advice from an old prary man, Cap?" he inquired.

"Of course I will."

"Then let's put twenty good miles between us and this *motte* afore we go into camp. I know what I'm talking about."

Captain Dick looked at him steadily for a moment, and then gave the rangers orders to mount. Rube picked out the best horse he could find among the captured ones, and then whistled up his own animal, and as the party rode away they saw the trained beast following like a dog, and now that he had taken a rest, keeping up with the rest of the party. Garry and another led the rest of the captured stock in a string, and the party kept on across the prairie at a lively pace, Rube in advance.

"I am mighty glad we happened to run across

you, Rube," declared the young leader. "I wanted a man of your sort, but I didn't exactly know where to find one."

"Critters," replied Rube, "I don't ginerally cotton to youngsters, but then a man don't often run foul of young chaps of your breed. There's one thing I'd orter say, though, an' that is, you chaps ar' a leetle too easy on Greasers; the best use you kin put them critters to is to bang 'em, or jast raise the'r ha'r."

"You don't get over my letting the Mexican go, Rube."

"No, I don't. You see I've hed a heap of 'sperience of the critters, an' I know durned well they ain't no better'n a turkey buzzard or a kyote. Kindness ar' wasted on 'em, an' ther fust chainece they get thur mor'ly bound ter do yer a p'izen mean trick."

"Where are you taking us, old fellow?" asked the captain, as he saw it was no use to argue with the obstinate old hunter.

"I've got a mort of places, I reckon, I might take yer, pards," he answered, "but I'm headin' now fur Cl'ar Spring. Thar I kalkilate ter make camp."

"Clear Spring. Seems to me I've heard some strange yarns about that place, Rube," averred the captain.

"Mout be yer hev," replied Rube, casting an uneasy glance at the young leader. "See yer; I'm thinkin' yer ain't the kind of chaps to keer fur spooks."

"Phat's thim?" demanded Garry, his eyes starting from his head.

"Ghosts, Garry," replied Clarrie, who was full of mischief. "They say Clear Spring is just boiling over with them."

"Murther! don't be coming the comether over a b'ye that's far from the Ould D rt, Rube, alanah, but tell me av there's ghosts where ye is going?"

"I dunno," replied Rube, in a quiet way. "I never see 'em myself, but I've hern tell the'r' jast awful. But what I banker fur ter-night ar' a good kiver, an' ther's a gorge above the spring whur, with sech a party ez this yer, I'd kalkilate ter lick a hull army of Greasers, one down another come on. Whoopee! yer kin see the pass now, boyees."

The night was remarkably clear and objects could be seen at nearly as great a distance as if it were broad daylight. Perhaps three miles away lay a low mountain range, their tops silvered by the light of the moon and toward these passes the Young Mustangers urged their horses. Half an hour later they plunged into the pass and Rube gave a sigh of relief as the last of the party passed in.

CHAPTER III.

CLEAR SPRING—CHASING A GHOST—RED-SPUR RALPH.

HALF an hour's ride through the dark pass brought them to a little circular opening in the midst of the mountains, in the center of which bubbled up the shining water know to the hunters far and near as "Clear Spring." It was a favorite stopping place with them, both because here was plenty of clear fresh water and it was a spot absolutely impregnable in case of attack. The spring itself was not more than ten feet in

circumference, but just below it the hunters had scooped out a second bed ten feet across and perhaps three deep, which was continually filled from the overflow of the main spring and made a capital watering place for the animals. The boys at once flung themselves from the saddles and gave the creatures a chance to drink, while they watched them. When all were satisfied, the saddles were removed and the horses driven into a small ravine which spurred out from the main pass in which sprung up a thick growth of short luxuriant grass. In this place the horses were secured by the lariats and the party went back into the main pass and flung themselves down beside the spring on the short grass, and those who were smokers lit their pipes and prepared to enjoy themselves.

Among these was Rainbow Rube, who produced a bag of "Killikinic" from his possible sack, with a red clay pipe, and filling the capacious bowl, drew his saddle under his shoulders and lay back in lazy enjoyment.

"I say, young 'un," he ejaculated, addressing Captain Dick, "you'd better set a lookout on the top of the bluff, an' he kin give us notice ef any unaisy varmint come this-a-way."

"Take the place, Weasel," was the calm order of Captain Dick. "You know what to do."

Weasel quietly took up his rifle and glided away, and the old hunter looked after him admiringly. He had seen much in the motions of the lad which suited him.

"A born trailer, that young cuss ar'," he said, briefly.

"He ought to be," replied Dick, "for he comes of the true breed. You ought to have kno n his father, Rube—Old Zeke Wilson they called him."

"Knowed him! I should say so. I tuk my fust lesson in trailin' from him, an' I don't want no better teacher. He wur wiped out in this yer very pass nigh onto ten year ago. Lord, how things come up! Some day I'll tell yer about it, but the little 'un would like to hear it, maybe, an' I'll keep it. What's troublin' yer, Irish?"

Garry was casting uneasy glances about him, now up the mountain sides and again down the dark passes.

"I'm thinkin' I don't like t..is place at all, at all," was the answer.

"You'd like this yer place mighty well ef ther Injuns got after yer," replied the hunter, with a laugh. "Thur's spooks hyer, thet I know, but—Thunder! what's thet?"

All turned quickly and saw a white-robed figure standing at the mouth of a dark pass, intently regarding the party. Two or three caught up their rifles, when they heard a mellow, rippling laugh, and the white form disappeared.

"Now, durn my hide!" cried Rube, drawing a long breath. "The critters didn't lie when they said the place wur ha'nted."

Garry, with his teeth chattering, was looking fixedly at the dark pass and evidently half inclined to run for it, when the same strange specter sprung up in another place, and Rube wheeled quickly, leveled his rifle, and was about to fire, when the young captain threw up his arm.

"None of that, old man," he said. "It might be human."

"No 'tain't," replied the old man, doggedly. "I thort I'd try a whack at it anyhow."

The figure had again disappeared.

"I'd rather you had picked out some other camp, if this sort of thing is going on," declared Richard Merry. "Its the queerest thing I ever heard of."

"Ha, ha, ha!" rung out the same strange laugh.

The boys wheeled again, and there was the specter, a hundred yards away, looking at them as before.

"Keep back all," shouted the captain. "By George, I'll run it down."

Again the wild laugh rung out and the specter glided away in the moonlight, going up the mountain side, and Captain Dick sprung after it, determined to overtake it. The figure went on with a gliding motion and seemed to keep its distance with ease. On the crest of the ravine a level plateau stretched away for some distance. The fleet footed young man strained every nerve, but in spite of all his efforts the spectral form kept its distance apparently without effort. Dick Merry felt his breath growing short, but he put on renewed speed and seemed to gain a little, when the phantom figure suddenly disappeared. He sprung on only to p use upon the brink of a wide crevice which seemed to stretch for a hundred feet into the depths of the mountain.

"By heaven, I have chased it too close," he gasped, "and it has fallen into the ravine."

He kneeled on the brink and tried to pierce the depth of the gulch by the moonlight, when there floated up from below the same laugh which they had heard before.

"Away!" cried a hollow voice. "Come not near the home of the dead. Let them rest in peace."

Merry started back in dismay and for a moment felt his strong nerves shaken. He was not a believer in the supernatural, in fact, had always laughed at it, but these strange events puzzled him and he did not know what to think. However, the specter was gone, and he turned and ran back toward the camp, when there rose in the path another strange shape, not the one which he had seen before.

"Mortal," cried a hollow voice, "the man who intrudes upon the home of the dead is doomed. Back, while there is yet time."

Merry sprung boldly forward, when the long spectral arm was raised and he saw in the clear moonlight the fleshless bones of a skeleton arm. With a cry of absolute fear the young ranger covered his face for a moment, and when he looked up the skeleton form was gone, and Dick made a break for the camp.

"I reckon we'd better light out of this, Rube," he declared. "I don't scare easy, that you know, but when it comes to skeletons, I'm not there. I'll fight a regiment of Greasers, if it's necessary, but I can't say I'm hungry for this sort of cattle."

"I didn't reckon on no such thing as this yer," replied Rube, wiping the perspiration from his forehead. "I don't like to git out er this yer place to-night, though."

"Oh, I'm not going to run if the rest of you are for staying," replied Dick, who was beginning to be a little ashamed of weakening. "I don't like this sort of thing, though; that I acknowledge."

"I don't reckon any one hyar are hungry to stay," answered Rube. "Mout be it's some critter that wants to drive us out. I wish you'd on'y give the old man leave to drive a ball inter it."

"Fire at my breast!" cried the same hollow voice which Dick had heard from the depths of the ravine.

"Give it to him, Rube!" shouted Dick, who was beginning to get mad. "I'm not going to stand this."

Rube jerked his rifle to his shoulder and let drive. There was a mocking laugh, and the figure stood in the same place apparently uninjured. Dick snatched up his rifle and fired with a like result, and then there came a blood-chilling yell and the figure disappeared.

"Let's go," whined Garry, who was shaking in every limb. "It's no place fur a b'ye to stay that's not used to such things."

"All the devils from the pit shall not drive me out," shouted Merry, stamping his foot. "Here I stay, no matter what happens, and if you want to weaken, Garry, you know the back trail."

"All the divils out av Purgatory wouldn't dhrive me to l'ave ye, Capt'in Dick," replied the boy. "Av ye stay, I'll stay, too; but sorra wan av me likes it."

"Don't waste any more powder on specters," said the captain. "In the morning I am going to look this thing up, for I believe that some one is trying to frighten us out of this place."

"Hark!" cried Rube. "I reckon I hear huffs."

"Coming down the pass, too," replied one of the lads. "What's the orders, Cap? We'll fight anything human."

"Handle your rifles, but don't fire unless you get the word."

The beat of hoofs grew louder, and in a moment a single horseman dashed into the pass. He paused in considerable surprise as he saw the party, and laid his hand upon a weapon, but did not draw it.

"Friends or foes!" he demanded, in a ringing voice.

"Friends to true-hearted Texans," answered Dick. "What do you say to that, stranger?"

"That's my politics," replied the new-comer, urging on his horse. "I'll join you if you say so."

As he came nearer they saw a young man, not more than twenty-five, with long curling brown hair and a frank, open, manly face. His figure was strongly knit and he looked like a hard man to meet in the tug of a fierce battle. Rube sprung forward and extended his hand.

"Red Spur Ralph, by the hokies! Glad to see yer, pard; shake a paw."

"Well, old man, you are the one of all others I wanted to see. How goes it?"

"Easy enough, only ther ghosts ar' mighty thick right about yer. Hed the durndest time you ever heerd of."

The frank countenance of Red Spur darkened.

"You have seen the same visions that I have, then," he muttered. "I wish I could fathom it,

Rube. "I'd give a year from my life to know what is really the secret of Clear Spring. Who are these young fellows with you?"

"Captain Merry's rangers," replied Dick, coming forward. "Perhaps you have heard of us. The name of Red Spur Ralph is too well known to make any question necessary, and I am glad to meet you."

"And I have heard of the Young Rangers," responded Red Spur. "Have you been interviewed by the visions of the Clear Spring?"

"I don't care to talk about it," replied the young captain, "but one thing I do say, nothing shall drive me out of this place until I get ready. What do you say, Red Spur; do you camp with us?"

Red Spur Ralph, so named from his qualities as a horseman, threw himself from the saddle and led his animal to the spring for a drink. Then he secured the creature with the rest and came back.

Scarcely had he taken his place when the same spectral figure started up in full view of the camp.

CHAPTER IV.

ODO VELASQUEZ—A BLOODY BATTLE—A SON'S VOW OF VENGEANCE.

RALPH started to his feet and made a quick movement toward the figure. It stood immovable until he was within a few feet of it, and then suddenly glided back into the pass and was gone.

"I ought to have known better than to start after it," he said, with a short laugh. "It isn't the first time I have seen it, and you might as well chase a will-o'-the-wisp."

At this moment a clear whistle rung through the pass, and the party grasped their weapons, for they knew the warning whistle of the Weasel. Five minutes later he ran up with his rifle on a trail.

"Greasers, I reckon," he said. "A party of fifty, heading for the pass."

"Saddle up, boys," cried the old hunter. "We don't make no count of fifty Greasers, I don't reckon. Fly 'round lively. They must not see us yet."

The young rangers were quickly in the saddle and rode away after the old guide, who led them deeper into the pass. A hundred yards further on he turned into a spur which led to the east and ascending a gradual slope, gained a plateau which could only be reached by the narrow pass through which they had come. At a glance the forethought of the guide in choosing this place as a fortress was apparent. With over two dozen brave men, covered as they were by the sort of natural parapet which lined the ravine, they could hold at bay ten times their number.

"Look thar, Cap," asserted Rube, in a low voice. "Seems to me I wa'n't so much out when I told yer the best use yer c'd put a Greaser to war to lift his ha'r. D'ye see who's a-comin'?"

Two men were riding into the pass below at the head of a party who wore the gaudy trappings of the Mexican bandits. The first was a man of tremendous stature, nearly seven feet

in height, with black, lowering brows and angular face, and whose long, straight, black hair streamed half-way to his saddle. No need to tell the young rangers who he was; it was Odo Velasquez, a half Indian bandit, a man who was hated and feared all along the Texan border. He had made many a happy home desolate, and many a Texan had died in trying to wreak vengeance on him. He was one of those noted guerrilla leaders who made his home in the depths of the chaparral and from it issued on deadly forays and hurried back into his hiding-place when his work was done.

On his left rode Gil Perez, the man who had been spared by the order of Dick Merry, and who was now leading the Mexican brigands to take vengeance on the boys who had spared him.

Riding by twos, the Mexicans came into the pass and sprung from their saddles. It was plain, from their movements, that they did not know that the Young Mustangers had been before them, and had only come into the place as a good spot to make their camp. Fires were quickly lighted, for the pass was so sheltered that they could build them with safety, and the villainous band were quickly grouped about them, cooking, and engaging in shrill conversation, which could be plainly heard by the young men.

"Oh, somebody hold me!" hissed Rube. "Durn that Odo Velasquez; I've got it in for him the worst you ever see. Don't you think I c'd fetch him from yer, Red Spur?"

"I wouldn't risk a shot, if I were you," replied Red Spur. "You have not any better cause to hate Odo Velasquez than I, for in one night he made me a lonely wanderer on the face of the earth. But wait; our time will surely come, and we will take full vengeance."

"Hoeray fur us when the time comes. But say, what's the matter with the Greasers? they seem to be in trouble."

The Mexicans had left their fires and were huddling together in a group and casting wild looks toward the spot where the Young Mustangers had seen the apparitions. Even as they gazed, a round object was seen to leap from the mountain-side, scattering a train of sparks behind as it came, and, striking the ground in the midst of the guerrillas, burst with a loud explosion and as the Mexicans scattered, two of their number could be seen extended on the sod and others were apparently in pain.

"Good enough!" shouted Rube, dancing wildly on the plateau. "Pile it enter 'em; give 'em Hail Columbia *et cet'ra*, and do-se-do. Thar comes another."

Another fiery messenger shot out from the cliff and alighted among the now thoroughly frightened Mexicans with the same fatal effect. With cries of fear the scoundrels ran to the other side, when, to their horror, two of the dangerous missiles came slanting down, and bursting together, added to the terror of the villains, who now thought of nothing but to get to their horses and escape. Even Odo Velasquez, who hardly knew the quality of fear, could see nothing to be gained by staying and he was one of the first to get to the saddle and lead the way up the pass; but, to the surprise of Rube, they

turned into the same pass through which the rangers had come and commenced the ascent of the slope.

"Oh, blame my buttons, but we ar' in fur a b'ar fight," hissed Rube. "Come on, Red Spur. You an' I together kin teach these Greasers a lesson."

"Steady, Rube," was the command of Captain Dick. "Don't go off half-cocked. Here, boys, five of you line the pass on the right and five on the left. The rest stand by me."

The young rangers, who were used to obedience, sprung forward to obey the order.

"The first shot comes from me," cried the young captain. "When you hear that, pour it into them."

The Mexicans were riding recklessly up the pass, eager to get out of the way of the deadly shower which had been poured upon them from the rocks. They did not dream of danger in front, but hoped to reach the plateau, and from it come upon the rear of the party whom they believed to be concealed in the rocks above the spring. As they came crowding on, huddled together in their desperate haste to reach the plateau, Captain Dick sprung up with his heavy Colt in his hand and gave them a single shot. Instantly the mountains seemed alive, and a deadly fusilade was opened on the enemy, which piled the foremost, horse and man, in heap in the gory pass.

It was more than Mexicans could bear.

Those in the rear, with a display of horsemanship greatly to their credit, wheeled as if on pivots and dashed down the pass, followed by the shots and shouts of the Mustangers. Rube would have leaped away in pursuit, but Dick caught him by the breast of his greasy frock and forced him back.

"None of that, Rube!" he declared. "You are older than I am, but I'm captain of the Mustangers, and while I am I will be obeyed. I never allow my men to rush into danger until they know where they are going."

"By Heaven, young fellow!" cried Red Spur, "you are a man after my own heart, and I'm mighty glad we have met. That's always the way with you, Rube; you want to go it blind."

"But ain't none of them cussed Greasers ter be sallivated—say? What ar' we driften to when a young— But I cave. You b'ar me, boyees—I come down like Crockett's coon. What's the next racket?"

"Slip out there, Weasel, and tell us what is going on," commanded the young captain.

Weasel glided away quickly and was back in five minutes to say that the Mexicans had never turned bridle, but were riding for their lives, and that eight of their number had been killed outright in the pass and the rest had managed to get away.

"Now let me loose, Cap," pleaded Rube. "I can't live until I know whether that cussed Velasquez ar' rubbed out."

"He ain't!" squeaked Weasel. "See here, you; do you think any one except me is ever going to kill Odo Velasquez? You know he killed my father?"

"I reckon; I wur hyar when it wur done."

Weasel sprung to the side of the guide and looked eagerly into his face.

"How can that be! Of all those who were with him, not one was left alive."

"Thet's the way they tell it, but I know it wur a durned lie. Keep cool, little 'un; when we git another camp I'll tell you all about it."

"I can hardly wait," declared the boy. "I always knew it was Odo Velasquez who led the party, but I didn't know how it was done."

"I'm the only man alive kin tell ye, little 'un. See yer; I like yer, an' I liked yer father, an' ef we hev any luck, you an' me will hev many a trail tergether."

"Less talk," insisted the captain. "Now that the Greasers are gone, we will go back and camp in the old place."

"Howly Moses!" cried Garry, in a tone of wild dismay. "Phat d'ye mane? D'ye want us all to be kilt entirely?"

"Are you weakening again, Garry?" demanded Dick Merry.

"Sorra bit; but when it rains fire an' brimstone on a place, loike it did a phile ago, I does be thinkin' it's a moighty good place to be kaping out av. But go it, ye divil; hev it yer own way."

Five minutes later the party were back in their old camp, and after posting guards at the mouth of the pass, to see that the Mexicans did not return, the rest of the party took their blankets, and drawing up their saddles for pillows, lay down to rest. For over an hour the novelty of their position kept them awake, and then deep silence fell upon the camp of the rangers.

CHAPTER V.

WEASEL HEARS HOW HIS FATHER DIED—THE BEAUTIFUL FUGITIVE.

RED SPUR, who seemed a solitary bird, had made his couch on the opposite side of the spring, and lay quiet in the clear moonlight, his brawny arms folded on his broad breast and his handsome face turned up to the summer sky. His bosom rose and fell with his deep breathing and he made a handsome picture as he lay asleep. Suddenly, without warning, a white-robed figure glided out of the pass and stood for a moment beside him, looking down into the handsome face, and then made a despairing gesture, raising both hands high in the air. Then the figure bent forward and laid something on Red Spur's breast and flitted away, and he was not disturbed until a sudden clatter about the camp warned him that the rangers were astir. He sprung quickly to his feet.

"I'm ashamed of having overslept myself in this way, captain," he averred, coming up to Dick, "but I had a hard day yesterday and was worn out."

"Don't speak of it, Ralph," replied Merry. "Excuse me; but you may as well have a name if you are going to stay with us. But what is that paper on the bosom of your hunting shirt?"

Ralph looked down and saw for the first time that a white paper was pinned on his breast. He took it off quickly and saw that it was covered with writing and read it aloud.

"BEWARE!"

"Twice last night you were spared because you were not of those who had wronged the Spirits of Clear Spring. The time for mercy has gone by and we cannot let you escape longer. Hark to the warning; break up your camp and let the dead rest, you, and all who are with you—or you and all who are with you shall die before the setting of another sun. Be warned in time and seek not to dive into the mystery. Of all who have tried to do so, not one is alive."

"The spirits write excellent English to say the least," declared Ralph. "What say you, Dick; shall we brave the spirit and stay?"

"That's what I am here for. If I had not meant to do that, I give you my word I would have been thirty miles to the north before this. Here, Rube; we are going to explore the passes. Will you go with us?"

"Not any for me," replied Rube. "Look yer; kin yer make anything by fooling around these ghosts?"

"I don't know as we can, but we are going to take a whack at it just the same, and if there isn't any one here game enough to go with us, we can go it alone; that's all I've got to say."

"We go wherever the captain goes, if he orders us, and don't you forget it, Mr. Red Spur," cried Clarrie Lee. "Rube is all right; he don't like spooks any more than we do, but he won't take water when it comes to a fight."

"Oh, you can't tell me anything about Rainbow Rube, boys," replied Red Spur, laughing. "He's true blue, and he knows that I don't doubt him in the least. We two are enough to go, anyhow, and you'd better give your orders to your lieutenant before we set out."

"That's Clarrie Lee. You'll attend to things while I am gone, Clarrie."

"All right, Cap."

"Three revolver shots, two close together, and then a pause before the last shot, will fetch us back on a run. Now then, Red Spur."

The two young men grasped their weapons and hurried away down the pass, closely watched by the friends they left behind them. Rube was ill at ease, and seemed dissatisfied with himself because he had allowed them to go without him. Clarrie Lee saw that he was troubled, and came up to him.

"Steady, old pard," he said; "every one knows you are square as a die, and no one knows it better than Red Spur Ralph. He said so before he went."

"Right you ar', little 'un," responded the old border-man, "but don't you see it puts me in a pocket, so to speak; kinder holes me, durn it. I've allus hed the name of stickin' by my pards closer than a brother, yer know, an' it riles me powerful to think I let a spook skeer me; and I am skeered—skeered orfully, young 'un."

"I reckon you ain't alone in that, pard," answered Clarrie, with his usual reckless laugh. "Now, I can fight Greasers like a little man, and I'm not afraid of wild game, let it come which way it will; but these white spirits take the starch out of me. Hey! Weasel."

"Here I am," squeaked the boy. "You'd better go back where you were and watch. I needn't tell you to keep your eye peeled; you'll do that without orders."

"Come with me, Rube," whispered the

Weasel. "You promised to tell me about my father, and you can't have a better time than this."

Rube took up his rifle, glad of anything which would take him away from the vicinity of the spring, and the two quickly crossed the mountain to a place from which they could watch the broad prairie from which danger would be most likely to come. It was a clear day and the level plain lay before them, with here and there a scattered motte, and there, perhaps two leagues away, they plainly saw the pennon of the Mexican brigand. He had made a camp on the edge of the timber and was evidently waiting for something, though what it was they could not well determine.

"Mebbe the skunk thinks he hez got us caught like rats in a trap and we kain't git out," declared Rube, chuckling, "but ef thet's his game, he don't know the old man. Take a settin', youngster; you want to know how yer father died, hey?"

"Yes," hissed the Weasel.

"Fust an foremostly, then, yer see that big yaller skunk Odo Velasquez, don't ye?"

The Weasel nodded.

"Then b'ar it in mind, an' take a crack at him whenever ye kin fur thet is the man that killed yer father. Ye don't need to write it down; likely ye kin remember the name."

A hissing sound came from the lips of the lad and he gripped the rifle which he held so firmly that the blood actually started from beneath his finger nails.

"T'war this-a-way," continued Rube—"Thar war a party of twenty, mostly old hunters, hed been off on a prospect. Thet were ten year ago an' jest at nightfall we made a camp at Cl'ar Spring. T'war about this time of year, an' the kentry war right peaceful. We'd jest druv the last Injun into his hole an' didn't reckon thar wur anything to worry us on this side of the Rio. Mebbe we wur keerless, I reckon so, anyhow, an' we didn't set no guard; an' durned ef Odo Velasquez didn't light on us with nigh a hundred men, an' he'd us trapped afore we hed time to wink an eye. Five of the boys went down in the fust charge, an' more wur hurt, an' he take the hull outfit. We thought mebbe he'd tak our plunder an' turn us loose—we didn't know Odo then ye see—but that wa'n't what he wur arter. He jest walked up an' down afore us, an' fin'ly he picked out a man."

"You are Sam Saul," he sez, 'the man thet shot Ramon Vardez over by San Antonio?'

"Sam wa'n't the man to deny it when he'd done a thing, so he owned up like a man."

"Begin with him," sez Odo; 'give him a volley.'

"They tuk poor Sam ten paces to the front, an' then durned ef the hull gang didn't up with the'r carabines an' give it to him. Killed? I should smile! He had twenty bullets through and through him. They tuk the boys out one by one, an' hed dropped 'leven the same way, when the mean cuss happened to see yer father an' knowed him, an'— I hate to tell it, boy—"

"Go on!" hissed the Weasel; "tell it all."

"He rode up to him, as he stood in the line, and blew his brains out right where he stood,

an' that because yer father was one of a party that drove the cuss off once when he attacked a train up thar on the Brazos. Then they all seemed to get blood mad, an' commenced firing on our party.

"I went down among the rest, with a bullet acrost the skulp, an' whether they wur tired of slaughter or was afraid to stay I dunno, but they took our plunder an' put out. An' thet's the rayson I want Odo Velasquez's blood; an' thet's the rayson I've swore I'd roller him till I put him on his back or he downs me."

"Give me your hand, Rubel!" cried the boy. "I've wanted all these years to know just how it was done, but no one ever told me. As for yinder big coward"—shaking his fist at the burly form of the Mexican in the distance—"I'll live long enough to kill him with my own hand, and he'll know when I strike that it is the son of Zeke Wilson who gives him his death."

"Good blood will tell, little 'un," averred the grim hunter. "Say—what are them skunks up to?"

"There goes one of them up a tree, by George!" cried Weasel. "I can see him almost to the top. Rube, hope to die if he hasn't put a flag on the top of the tree—a long red streamer with a white spot in the middle."

"Durn him, he wants help," growled Rube.

"Thar's another party of the vill'ins near by, an' he wants to call 'em. See hyar; ef them boys will listen to the old man, they'll skin out'n this hyar afore things gets too hot."

"Look, look!" cried Weasel, pointing to the prairie.

Perhaps two miles away a slight figure could be seen urging a piebald mustang at a break-neck pace. There was need of haste, for close behind thundered four of the Mexicans, the best riders in the world, their lariats ready for a throw, and urging on their horses with their cruel spurs, which drew blood at every stroke. As they came nearer the two crouching on the rocks saw that the person in advance was a young girl, and that she was straining every nerve to escape. On the course they were taking they must pass close to the rocks on which the old hunter and the boy lay, and Rube grasped his rifle.

"How ar' ye on the shoot?" he whispered.

"Don't often miss," replied Weasel.

"Then I take the fust man, an' you be ready fur the next. Hey! By thunder, thar goes one."

The girl, as she rode, was looking over her shoulder and they could see that she carried on her saddle-bow a short rifle of peculiar construction. The leading Mexican was swinging his arm back preparatory to making his cast, when the pied mustang, obeying the touch of his rider's knee, wheeled suddenly, just as the *lazo* flew through the air. The girl threw up her hand in such a way as to prevent the loop from settling over her head, and then, without raising the rifle higher than her waist, knocked the Mexican out of his saddle with a single well directed shot and was off again, loading as she rode.

"Oh, holy smoke," shouted Rube, unable to restrain himself; "that's the kind ov a woman critter fur me! I take thet long-beaked gyraffe

on the cream, boy; don't waste a shot on him. Take the one on the black."

Nothing daunted by the fate of his companion, and knowing that the rifle was empty, the next rider seemed actually to lift his horse forward and his lariat began to describe a graceful circle in the air. Either the girl did not realize how close he was or else was taken unawares, for the fatal noose was sent flying through the air without an effort on her part to avoid it.

CHAPTER VI.

ELEGANT ED'S DEFIANCE—THREE BRAVE MEN FACING GREAT ODDS.

RED SPUR and Dick Merry plunged at once into the mountain pass and rapidly ascended the slope until they reached the ravine down which the phantom form had disappeared on the night before.

It might have been cleft in the mountain by a blow of a giant ax, for the huge cliff seemed divided to a depth of two or three hundred feet, and at its bottom the rocks joined again. It seemed impossible that any one could plunge from that height without being dashed in pieces upon the rocks below.

They passed along the verge for some distance and could see nothing, and Dick began to think he had been the victim of an optical illusion on the night before; but he remembered the skeleton form which had met him upon the mountain side, and he was in the full possession of his senses at that time.

"We don't seem to get ahead very fast, Merry," declared Red Spur, with a light laugh. "My opinion is that until we get to the bottom of this ravine we shall know nothing."

"All right," snarled a voice behind them. "You shall go to the bottom, since you insist upon it. Ha! Throw up your hands!"

The two men whirled quickly, and saw, close to them, a strange, misshapen creature, with his face covered by a grisly growth of iron-gray hair, out of which looked a pair of eyes which glowed with devilish malignity. His figure was stunted, but his shoulders were those of a Hercules, and his naked, hairy arms showed wonderful development of muscle. These long arms were extended and each held a heavy revolver, pointed at the heads of the two young adventurers. They were too well trained in forest lore to hesitate, and each raised his hands above his head.

"Now see here, stranger," expostulated Red Spur, "don't it seem to strike you that you are rather familiar on short acquaintance?"

"The familiarity is on the other side, my gentle pardners," answered the stunted giant. "Now what do you two want here? Don't give me any lip, because I won't stand it."

"Do you own the mountains around Clear Spring?" demanded Merry.

"I'll take the ownership just this once, my prairie flower," replied the man. "If I didn't know you, and that you were two square men, I'd have let you have it long ago. As it is, I don't see any other way. What are you fooling around here for?"

"We came on business," answered Merry.

"And your business is prying into the affairs

of other people. No; there is no way but to drop you both."

"That would be murder, Elegant Ed," said Red Spur, quietly; "and from what I know of you, you are not that kind of a man. You'd go out yonder on the slope and fight us two to one, but you wouldn't murder us in cold blood."

"See here, Red Spur," cried the strange being, "don't you know well you haven't seen anything of me for over two year, say? And ain't I had time to get cussed mean in that time? I think I'd better— Hal! Put up your hands."

"But listen to me, Elegant," rejoined Red Spur; "this isn't giving a man a fair shake. If I hold up my hands in this way much longer, all the blood will run out of them; and if we have a tussle, I won't be able to make it lively for you at all. And what's more, whether you shoot or not, I'm going to put my hands down."

"Will you promise me one thing before you put 'em down, Red Spur? You crack on your shooting, I know, and I reckon I know how to drive a center myself. What I want to say is, ef we can't agree, we'll go out there on the hill and take a shot apiece. One of us won't need another, I rather think."

"Good enough, Elegant," declared Red Spur. "When two men are ready to settle like gentlemen, it isn't necessary to say any more. I'm your meat whenever you want me, pard."

Elegant Ed returned his pistols to his belt, and Dick looked at him more closely. Now that he had heard the name and had time to think, he remembered the man, who was well known throughout Western Texas by name, although few could say that they had seen him. His deformity made him misanthropical, and he seldom came into the abodes of men, but dwelt in the mountains alone. Strange stories were told of his feats of strength and daring, and his wonderful skill with the revolver and rifle; and all men spoke of him as one who could make his hands take care of his head. Not so much in derision as that they delight in misnomers, the prairie men had named him Elegant Ed, and he had accepted the title, and was not angry when called by it. Merry could not but confess, as he looked at the square forehead of this man, that he had a reserve of power in him, and, taken all in all, he was a true-hearted friend or a desperate enemy.

"If you've got through looking me over, you two," he said, quietly, "maybe you'd get down to business. I would, if I was you. I want you to promise me to take your party out of these hills and leave me to go on my lonely way in peace."

"And suppose we refuse?" asked Red Spur.

"Then we'll go out and take the shot I was talking about awhile ago. Now see here, Red Spur, maybe I know, better than most men, that you've got a better reason to be inquisitive than your friend; but it won't do; you are wasting your powder."

"I'd like to oblige you, Ed," declared Red Spur, "but—"

"You've got to oblige me or fight," insisted Elegant Ed. "You ought to know, Red Spur, that I don't throw away words."

"I can answer on my own part, but not for

my friend," said Ralph. "I don't see that anything is to be made by fighting you, and if you are the Cerberus of this place, it will take more than two men to force the passage, and my advice to my friend is to take the back track. We won't try to pry into your secret, old man."

"It isn't mine so much as others," averred the man, sorrowfully. "As far as I am concerned, it don't matter the value of a deer-skin what happens to me, and the sooner I claim my share of mother earth and lie down in it, the better all round. Why, pards, I've seen the time when I was tempted to jump from the top of the highest peak in these mountains into the gulch, and I'd have done it long ago if it was not—"

"Crack!"

The report of a rifle rung out sharply, and the hair of Elegant Ed was seen to rise like the mane of a lion, and drawing his weapons, he rushed along the cliff in the direction of the sound, closely followed by the two friends. Five minutes later, they reached a point where they could overlook the plain, and saw the peril of the girl who was trying to escape from the Mexicans.

Elegant Ed uttered a roar like that of a wild beast and went bounding from rock to rock, just as the lazo hovered over the head of the girl.

But before he had made two bounds there came a puff of white smoke from the bluff next to them, and they saw the Mexican throw up both arms and fall from the saddle. His foot caught in the stirrup and he was dragged helpless across the plain. Elegant Ed did not pause, but continued to bound down the cliffs, and the two gallant young men, not to be outdone, followed him.

The peril of the strange girl was by no means over.

Of the ten Mexicans in pursuit, two had fallen, but the others closed in rapidly and so managed to encompass her that it was next to impossible to escape. But by this time her rifle was loaded, and wheeling the mustang, she uttered a shrill cheer and charged straight at the leading Greaser, who turned his horse's head and rode for his life. Twice the girl raised the rifle to her hip and seemed about to fire, but she again lowered it, and was about to draw back, when a piercing whistle sounded on the clear morning air, and turning, she saw Elegant Ed running across the plain at a speed which would have rivaled that of the fleetest mustang. In a moment more he was beside her.

"Skirt the rock toward south pass, Belle," he cried. "You know me; I'll stay by you while I can move a finger."

"Count us in," declared Red Spur, who had darted up, closely followed by Dick Merry, for both had made the perilous descent in safety. "And to begin, down goes that Greaser."

Both the young plainsmen carried their revolvers and as the first of the Mexicans came within range Dick threw up his hand and fired. The guerrilla, who was leaning forward in the saddle, partly hidden by the neck of his horse, started suddenly erect, clapped his hand to his side and rolled out of the saddle.

The other riders stopped in their course, evidently taken aback by this rude reception.

"You'd better light out, Greasers," shouted Elegant Ed, as he ran by the side of Belle's horse. "You'll run ag'in a snag, the first thing you know."

The southern men howled back something in reply and shook their weapons at the speaker, when two rifles spoke together on the rocks above and two more of the outlaws went down on the bloody grass. "Seems to rain bullets hereabouts," declared Ed, scarcely raising his head at the sound of the rifles. "Those boys of yours are some on the shoot, Red Spur."

"They don't often miss, but, unless I'm mistaken, the rifle of Rainbow Rube has spoken twice, and when he pulls something has got to go down."

"You have my thanks, gentlemen," said the girl. "I might have downed one or two more of the villains, but they had me cornered when you came to my aid, and I must have been captured. That would mean death, for, sooner than fall into the hands of Odo Velasquez, I would kill myself."

Red Spur looked at the speaker with a strange smile.

"You do not seem to recognize me, miss," he asserted.

"Oh, yes; I met you on the Brazos when you were in charge of a wagon train, and warned you that the Mexicans would attack you that night."

"And, thanks to the warning, we gave Odo Velasquez the worst thrashing he ever took. I've been on the hunt for you ever since, and never had the good fortune to meet you."

"I warned you then not to follow my trail, for it would lead you to disgrace or death," she declared. "We have met again strangely, but must meet no more. My friendship is fatal to all who come in my way."

Dick Merry looked at the speaker as she uttered these strange words, and thought he had never seen a more beautiful girl. She was young, not more than twenty, with a clear-cut, classic face, her dark hair curling in short ebony rings about her shapely head. Her dress was that of a Mexican hussar, and over all she wore a scarlet *magua*, which fell in heavy folds upon the croup of her fleet steed. Her feet were thrust into neatly-fitting cavalry-boots adorned with gilt spurs, and her hands were covered by embroidered gauntlets.

"Enough of this," exclaimed Elegant Ed, in an angry tone. "Push on."

Belle touched her horse, and the young men placed themselves between her and the Mexicans and they began to make the circuit of the rocks to reach the south pass. By this time the brigands had been joined by several of their comrades, and began to close in, but they had scarcely done so when the rifles again spoke from the rocks above them, and two more went down. The Weasel and Rube were again on hand. The rough reception seemed to daunt the Mexicans for a moment, and then, urged by a bugle blast wound by Odo Velasquez in the distance, they charged, twelve against three. It was a moment of terrible danger to the three adventurers and the brave girl they defended.

CHAPTER VII.

A BRAVE BATTLE—CAPTURE OF RED SPUR RALPH—THE OATH OF THE BORDERMEN.

SUCH odds as this would have frightened any except those who had passed their lives amid scenes of danger, but to these border heroes it was simply pastime. They might die, but in their vernacular it was only calling "time" on them, and it made no difference if they "died with their boots on."

"Light down, Belle," cried Elegant Ed. "It won't do to take any chances on this thing now."

The two rifles cracked above them and two more saddles were empty. Belle sprung from her animal, and taking sight across it, inflicted a desperate wound on one of the foremost riders, who came on with loud cheers, sending before them a volley of carbine balls which rapped smartly against the rocks behind the bold defenders, but harmed no one. The rude reception which they received had somewhat checked the ardor of the Greasers, and they again halted, when the bugle-blast of Odo Velasquez sounded anew on the clear air, and they again charged. But the temporary halt had given time to re-load all three rifles and they sounded with deadly effect.

"Set 'em up ag'in," roared Rube, dancing wildly on the crest of the rocks. "Load up, Weasel; we kin wipe out the hull Greaser nation."

The boy, who had not wasted a word uselessly, was slaming a load into his rifle as rapidly as possible, but both saw that there would not be time to fire before the Mexicans could give battle with the three brave men below.

"We must git the gal," lisssed Rube. "Come on, Weasel."

The boy sprung to his feet and they bounded away, disappearing in one of the huge fissures which seemed to split the mountain from side to side, while Red Spur, Merry and Elegant Ed, shoulder to shoulder, with bowie knives in their teeth and revolvers in each hand, boldly met the rush of the Mexicans. The attacking band were desperate men or they never would have assailed such a party as this. But they were continually being joined by others of their gang, and although a number had gone to earth, they were still twelve to three when they came within pistol range, and more were coming.

"Waste no shots," cried Ed, sternly. "Give it to them hot."

The deadly revolvers began to crack, and in the hands of such men the slaughter was terrible. A line of bodies marked the earth in front of the ravine in the mouth of which they had taken their stand, and every time a pistol cracked a Mexican's soul went to judgment. The assailing band had foolishly emptied their carbines during the charge, and had nothing except their old cavalry pistols with which to meet the finished weapons of the Americans. But even with such arms as these some execution must be done, and Red Spur dropped with a bloody track along his skull, and Dick Merry felt his left arm drop useless at his side as a bullet pierced the flesh.

"You must run for it, Belle," insisted Elegant Ed. "Get up the rocks somehow."

"Never!" she declared. "Where men are brave enough to die for me I will die with them."

"Never say die!" cried a clear voice. "Here we come, red hot fur war."

The sound of that voice gave Elegant Ed new life, for he knew that in Rainbow Rube he had a staunch ally.

The foremost Mexican fell with a ball through his heart, and Weasel did the business for another who was pressing on Dick Merry with up-lifted machete.

"Run fur it, gal!" shouted Rube. "We kin take keer of ourselves ef you ar' out of the way. Hoof it up the gully."

Belle saw that she could do no more, and darted up the ravine. Howls of rage were heard from the Mexicans as they saw the prize for which they had struggled so long escaping, and they renewed their efforts. But Rube bounded among them like a tiger with his clubbed rifle, and every time it fell a Mexican was swept from the saddle. He was seconded by the Weasel, who had caught up a lance which had fallen from the hand of a dead dragoon, and was using it with signal effect in keeping the Mexican horsemen at bay. The attacking party were already giving ground when another reinforcement came charging up, and the brave Americans were forced back several paces.

"By Heaven, they have got Red Spur," shouted Merry. "Charge them again, boys."

"No use," panted Elegant Ed. "See; there comes the whole gang."

He was right. Seeing that his men were being roughly handled, Odo Velasquez charged with all his force, and they were scarcely two hundred yards away when the Texans turned and darted up the pass. Those of the Mexicans who remained did not care to pursue, and the gallant party were out of sight in the pass when Odo came up.

He hurled at them a choice selection of Mexican vituperation, and was about to follow, when a single shot came from the pass and the huge leader reeled in his saddle and nearly fell. At the same moment the pass above was lined with riflemen, and a hail storm of bullets poured upon the bandits and they retreated in hot haste leaving their dead upon the field. Rainbow Rube and the Weasel ran out after them and gave them a parting shot, but found to their dismay that they had taken Red Spur with them in their flight.

"Draw your knives," cried Elegant Ed, baring his glittering blade, "and cross them with mine."

Rainbow Rube, Dick Merry and the Weasel obeyed.

"Take this oath," aspirated the hunchback. "I swear in my own name to follow like a hound on the trail of the Mexicans, and never stop or stay until I have released Red Spur Ralph or taken vengeance for his death, if he is slain."

Before the others could repeat the oath a bright bowie was crossed with theirs and a ringing voice cried: "So may God deal with me, as I keep this solemn vow."

The speaker was the strange girl whom they only knew as Prairie Belle.

"This won't do at all," declared Elegant Ed. "You know well I won't allow you to take any chances of that kind, Belle."

"I would like to know how you are going to prevent it," replied the girl, in a spirited tone.

"I have taken the oath and will abide by it. Red Spur Ralph is one of the bravest men I know, and was taken in defending me from a fate worse than death, falling into the hands of that black scoundrel, Odo Velasquez. No, Ed; you will talk to me in vain. And as for myself, I should be worse than a coward if I sneaked away now and left this brave man to his fate."

"But what can you do?"

"Leave me to judge of that. Do your work, as you have sworn, and leave me to do mine."

"By Heaven, Belle—"

"It is useless; I have sworn!"

Ed saw that he was wasting words, and dropped his head. The next moment he raised it.

"At least we must work together," he declared. "Which is the best scout of us three?"

Rube laid his hand upon the shoulder of Weasel Wilson.

"Ef yer want a feller with an eve like a hawk, with a step ez light ez a feather on a stream, and the coolest head in fourteen counties, here's your meat."

"I've seen him work when he didn't know I was watching him," averred Elegant Ed. "What do you say, boy—will you take the trail?"

"I'm right there every time," answered Weasel. "Now see here! I've got eyes in my head, and I've a notion you can give me something that will do for a signal in the dark."

A strange smile passed over the head of Elegant Ed, and laying his hand on the shoulder of the boy he led him aside and they held a whispered conversation. Then Ed took from his capacious pocket a couple of queer-looking balls, which the Weasel carefully concealed upon his person, and the two came back. They were about to say something more, when Belle called their attention to the plain, and they understood why the signal had been set in the tree-top. Nearly fifty warriors of the Apache nation were riding rapidly across the plain, and soon mingled with the band of Odo Velasquez. Rube, a man who knew all the bands which roamed the plain, recognized that of Black Vulture, an outlaw Apache chief, whose crimes had been so great that he was even at war with his own tribe, and had been forced to consort with such men as Odo Velasquez in self-defense.

"That's bad," asserted Rube. "Durn me ef thet don't drive me into a hole. Thar ain't a meaner crowd in the State than them cusses, an' thar is goin' to be fur flyin' 'round loose mighty soon. Durn old Black Vulture, sez I!"

"We are wasting time," interposed the strange hunchback. "Belle, I order you to return and seek the place of safety which you know for the sake of those you left behind you."

The girl had lifted her head quickly, but at his words a quick flush came into her face, and her eyes fell.

"It must be so, I suppose," she answered, "but I will not go unless you promise to come to me soon and give me the assurance that Red Spur shall be saved."

"We can't do anything for him before night," replied Ed, in a half angry tone.

"That is true. Well, I am off."

She bounded suddenly away and plunged into one of the mountain passes, while the three adventurers stood watching the movements of the enemy. They had met and fraternized upon the plain, and the keen eyes of Weasel Wilson could make out that Odo Velasquez was seated on the grass under a spreading tree, evidently very weak, and he smiled as he knew that his shot had not been entirely wasted. Even as he watched, they saw Red Spur strongly bound and guarded and brought face to face with Black Vulture.

"I wouldn't give a picayune for his life now," exclaimed Rube, "for the old Vulture has got it in for him, hot. Say good-by to Red Spur Ralph."

CHAPTER VIII.

BLACK VULTURE CLAIMS A VICTIM—RAMON THE RUNNER—A NEW MEMBER OF THE BAND.

MATTERS did look gloomy for the handsome young prairie man.

He had been dragged away by the hand of Velasquez, more dead than alive, and had just recovered sufficiently to be able to stand, when he saw Black Vulture and his band join the party. These men had met before, and in a hard battle with a party of prairie men the band of the Vulture had been so decimated that it was nearly a year before he was able to gather men enough to take the field. Two of his brothers and one son had lost their scalps that day, and he was not likely to forget that the party was led by Red Spur Ralph.

The Vulture was a man past the middle age, strongly built, with pure Indian features and a nose hooked like the beak of the bird whose name he bore. His broad breast was scarred with the scars of many battles, and one livid mark across the face, which years could not obliterate, did not add to his beauty. He uttered a snarling sound as Red Spur was dragged out.

"I have waited three years for this hour," he said, in the Mexican dialect, "and the time has come. Speak, Odo Velasquez; do you give this man to me?"

"By the saints, Vulture, you ask too much," replied Velasquez. "You see me here, robbed of my strength by the bullet sent by one of his friends, and you ask me to give up my vengeance on him."

"You shall not lose your revenge by me, Velasquez," asserted the Vulture. "See; do you think I ask for this man because I love him?"

"Faith, no," answered Velasquez, with his brutal laugh. "What will you give me in return if I yield him up to you?"

"I will join with you to snare the young prairie rangers. They are wolves not easily trapped and have set their mark upon you. Without my help you dare not attack them again."

"Dare not?"

"I have spoken. If I draw off my men and the rangers come out to attack you, your men will run like sheep. But, my warriors will not run."

"If I were on my feet and strong enough to do battle I would laugh at you, chief," declared Velasquez, "but you know I need you and can make your own terms. Take him, then, and do with him as you will."

"You hear, Red Spur," hissed the Vulture, bending in the saddle until his face was close to that of the prisoner. "You are mine now; mine to torture for the death of my two strong brothers and my son, who died by your hand upon the Brazos."

The only answer of Red Spur was to spit in the face of his enemy. The Vulture uttered a savage cry and drawing back his spear, thrust it straight at the bosom of Red Spur Ralph. The gallant young man did not take a step backward, but stood with a smile upon his face, waiting for the steel point to find his heart. Something in his look told the angry Indian that instant death was what he sought, and he suddenly turned the point aside, so that it only plowed a deep furrow in the side of the Texan.

"That will do for a first trial, Vulture," he said. "Try again. I know you—the man whom the Apaches will not have among them, who dare not go back to the village where he was born, fearing that the women will beat him to death. Shall I spit in your face again, to give you courage?"

"I was too fast," replied the Vulture. "You sought for a sudden death, and nearly found it at my hands. Big Wolf, Lone Dog and Tiger Tooth, come to me."

Three savage-looking braves rode up, and waited for further orders.

"This man is your prisoner," declared the Vulture; "I give him into your charge. Do not take your eyes from him, night or day, until his hour has come. When I ask for him, if you do not bring him to me I will kill you with my own hand."

Big Wolf, who seemed to answer for the rest, nodded gravely, and at once leaped from his horse and approached the prisoner, whom he seized by the arm. The other two followed, and they led him into the *motte* and proceeded to make him secure after the Indian fashion. A lariat was cut into four equal parts and one made fast to each ankle and wrist, and the other ends of the cords were fastened to four stunted shrubs in such a way that the prisoner was compelled to lie flat on his back and could not turn himself one way or the other.

Then Big Wolf took his station at his feet, and the two others on each side, and stood like statues carved in bronze waiting for the moment when the orders of the chief should release them.

Red Spur was not a man to give up easily, but he felt that he was in a tight place and that his chances for long life were not very bright. He did not waste any words upon his guards, for he saw in them those men who only knew unquestioning obedience to their chief. He had

confidence that his friends would do all in their power to aid him, but would they come in time?

He had been so desperate when he spat in the face of the chief that he hoped a single blow would have ended his life, but he had been disappointed.

"I wish I could have stirred up that black devil to kill me," he muttered; "but he wouldn't do it. He is saving me for the torture, and when it comes it will be terrible. I wonder what the scheme is?"

He could hear the busy hum of conversation outside the grove—the hoarse guttural tones of the Indians, mingled with the sharp, vicious voices of the Mexicans—and knew that they were laying some plan for attack on the young rangers.

That did not trouble him greatly, for he knew the boys were capable of taking care of themselves, even against the force which would be hurled against them. The only fear was a surprise, and that would not be easy to effect with such men as Rainbow Rube and Elegant Ed.

"I'd give ten thousand dollars to be with them this minute," he groaned, writhing in his bonds. "I say, red-skin; what is the hour?"

Big Wolf made no reply.

"Oh, you've got a tongue and ought to know how to handle it, you red fool," cried Red Spur in the Apache language. "How long before the sun goes down?"

"Red Spur should not be anxious for the going down of the sun," answered the Indian. "For it only brings him nearer to his doom. The sun is here."

He pointed through the trees and from the direction his finger took Red Spur was satisfied that it was considerably past noon. All at once he heard loud shouts from the Mexicans and Indians, and turning his head to one side, he looked across the plain, in the direction of the mountains. To his surprise he saw a young boy, in mixed Mexican and Indian attire, dart suddenly out of the pass in which they had battled with the Mexicans, and the next moment Elegant Ed and Rube came in sight, running swiftly on the trail of the flying lad. He was a beautiful runner and headed straight for the *motte* as if he knew he had friends there. Half a score of Indians and Mexicans caught up their weapons and darted away to meet the two whites, who suddenly stopped as they saw their enemies and fired three or four shots at long range from their revolvers, but the distance was too great for them to do any damage and the boy ran on unharmed. He was quickly surrounded by the Indians and taken into camp. Velasquez, who had recovered from the effect of the shot sufficiently to stand, came up to him.

He was a slight boy, and was panting hard after his long run. He looked fearlessly at the brigand and there was a devilish gleam in his black eyes which suited Velasquez.

"Look you, my boy," cried the outlaw, "I need not ask, if you are of Mexican blood, for your face shows it. What do you seek on the prairie?"

"I seek for that I have found, the great guerrilla, Velasquez," replied the boy. "Would

you know who I am? My name is Ramon Valruna, and I have lived in San Antonio until the place became too warm for me."

"How did that happen?"

"My knife was too sharp," was the cool reply, accompanied by a murderous look, "and it is not my fault if a cursed Americano ran upon it. San Antonio was no place for me after that and I came away. I heard you were somewhere on the plains and I have been roaming about, living as I could, in the hope to find you."

"What were you doing in yonder pass?"

"I came upon a party of Americano boys before I was aware that they were there and had to play innocent. But I heard them talk of Velasquez—you are the great Velasquez, are you not, *senor*?"

"I am Velasquez; what then?"

"I heard them talk and understood that you were here, and per Dios! The first chance I got I took to my heels, and here I am. They chased me, but they might as well have chased the wind. I am not called Ramon the Runner for nothing."

"Now that you are here, what do you want?"

"To join you. I have heard it said that there was not one among you who did not have the blood of a Texan on his hand. I, too, can claim it, and if you will make me one of your party, I will follow you—to the death."

There was a desperate earnestness and withal a wickedness in his face as he said this, which carried conviction with it, and Velasquez was forced to believe him.

"I am always glad of recruits whom I can trust," he said, "and these devil's babies of mine are continually getting themselves cut off in their prime and my force needs constant recruiting. Here, Gil Perez."

His lieutenant came forward.

"This young dog wants us to put him in a way to get his throat cut," declared the outlaw. "Get him a horse—there are spare ones enough, the holy saints know, and give him a carbine."

"Can you ride, boy?" demanded the lieutenant.

The boy laughed in a shrill way.

"You ask a vaquero, and the son of a vaquero, if he can ride! Give me a horse and I will show you."

One of the spare horses was led up, a somewhat vicious beast, and the boy stepped up to him, and the first thing he did was to strike the brute a sharp blow across the muzzle before he sprung into the saddle. He was scarcely settled there when the mustang "bucked" savagely, but the boy sat him like a Centaur, settling himself in the saddle easily after every bound in a way which showed that he was an excellent horseman. The animal soon tired of the amusement, and the Runner planted his elbow on the high pommel of the Mexican saddle, rested his chin on the palm, and looked at the lieutenant with a smile.

"You will do," he exclaimed. "Can you shoot?"

"A little, *senor* lieutenant. Do you see that mark on yonder tree near the root?"

He pointed to a white spot perhaps as large as a silver dollar full fifty yards distant. Then

drawing up his carbine, he rode back a little and charged toward the tree, firing as he came.

"'Tis a poor tool," he asserted, looking at the carbine with great disfavor, "but you will find the ball in the blaze."

A number of both Indians and Mexicans ran to the spot and uttered shouts of wonder as they found the bullet planted in the center of the spot.

"By the saints," shouted Velasquez, "I have found a jewel. You shall stay with me, Ramon, and I will make a man of you, for I believe you are the sharpest boy in Texas."

And the time came when he recalled those words and was forced to own that they were true.

CHAPTER IX.

A USELESS APPEAL—OVERTAKEN BY THE STORM—MYSTERIOUS MOVEMENTS OF RAMON THE RUNNER.

RAMON the Runner had succeeded in ingratiating himself with the Mexicans by his skill as a horseman and his adroit use of the rifle. Besides, there was a villainous look about him, and a cool hardihood when he spoke of the murder which had made him an outlaw, that suited these wild men, and he came back into the circle of the camp quite a hero. Even the grim Vulture, a man not easily won, looked at him with approving eyes.

"Big chief some day," he muttered, briefly. "Now speak; when we go and fight the young rangers, Velasquez?"

"The sooner the better," replied Velasquez, "for I suffer all the torments of the pit while they are exulting over me. What say you, boy; shall you be able to lead us?"

"Humph," drawled Ramon. "I haven't been with you long, but it seems to me, if I were to give advice, I wouldn't attack them in broad daylight. Caramba! They shoot as well as I do, and many a comely head would be in the dust before you could defeat them. At night, taken with a rush, it seems to me it might be better done."

"I believe the boy is more than half right," declared Velasquez. "Your men are best on a surprise, chief, and at night would do good work. What do you say?"

"The young head is often wise," was the answer. "The dogs are ready for us now, and I cannot afford to lose braves when it is useless. Do you know where they camp, boy?"

"Oh, yes; they are by Clear Spring and they have a line of guards on the rocks, and we can't get at them from the front without a fight. But I have found a path they know nothing of, and at night, when all is quiet, I will lead you."

"Enough," cried the chief, "we will wait for darkness. When the sun rises there will not be one of these hounds alive to tell the story."

Ramon began to stroll through the camp, stopping now and then to chaff one of the Mexicans who lowered at him as they felt the lash of his sharp tongue. While going about in this way he came to the spot where Red Spur lay, guarded by the three Indians. Ramon broke into a laugh as he saw the American extended on the earth.

"You have him fast, brothers," he exclaimed.

in the Indian's tongue. "It would not be very easy for him to get away."

Big Wolf nodded gravely, but did not reply. He was naturally taciturn, and did not waste words. The lad looked intently at the prisoner for a moment, and then said:

"This must be the man the young rangers were so angry about, one called Red Spur Ralph. I heard four men swear to take no rest until he was free or they had avenged him. They will try to keep their oaths, and you must watch him close, my brothers."

"Big Wolf will watch," was the grim reply, "because if Red Spur escapes the chief will kill Big Wolf."

"It behooves you to attend to your business closely, then," declared the boy, "for those men meant just what they said. Well, good by, Red Spur; we will take care of your friends, if they come."

He stepped back quickly to the side of Velasquez.

"You have a prisoner there who is a brave man," he said. "I have seen him fight single-handed with four strong men, and beat them."

"He is brave enough, if that were all," answered Velasquez, "but he is not my prisoner, boy; I have given him to Black Vulture, in order to win him to my side. Mark you, Ramon, among those whom you saw in yonder camp, was there a girl who is known as Prairie Belle?"

"She was there," replied the boy. "What of her?"

"Bear in mind, when we attack them, that no harm must come to her. I have chosen her as my wife, and the man who injures her shall die by my hand."

"I will look to her and guard her life as I would guard my own. But what can you see in her to attract you, Captain Velasquez?"

"She is beautiful."

"Beautiful! Bah; I do not think much of your taste. Compared to our ripe Mexican women, her beauty is that of the pale lily beside the rose—and I prefer the rose."

"I tell you, boy, that she is the most beautiful woman on the Texan plains."

"We will not quarrel. To me she seems coarse and uneducated, the sort of wife for a rude borderman, but not for one who will one day hold a high place under the Mexican government, perhaps that of President or dictator. It has been spoken of. But let it pass; I will take care of her."

"Why, you impudent dog, she would finish you as I would kill a fly. It is her bravery, as much as her beauty, that I am in love with. There are none like her—no, not one."

"Hard hit, *mio capitano*," cried Ramon, laughing. "However, I was talking to you of Red Spur. What is the Vulture going to do with him?"

"Faith, I think he means to roast him," was the cruel reply.

"It seems hard, *capitano mio*, to see such a man as that given over to the torture. Why do you permit it?"

"I have an account to settle with the scoundrel myself, and if the Vulture did not end him, I would do it. There is no fate too terrible

for him, for I believe that he comes between me and Prairie Belle."

"A lovers' quarrel. Well, be it so, but it is not my way. Had I an enemy who was too strong for me, no one should take revenge out of my hands, but I would go to him and bury my dagger in his heart. All men to their way; you have yours, I have mine, and mine is the best and bravest. Do you think it will storm to-day?"

Velasquez glanced at the sky.

"If it does, the better for our purpose, for in the cover of the storm we can do our work more easily. Why do you look so earnestly at the sky?"

"I have seen many storms arise, but never one like this, Captain Velasquez."

It was now nearly five o'clock, and the afternoon had been a remarkably brilliant one. But now a dense black cloud was seen creeping slowly up the sky, a cloud of an inky blackness, which seemed to drive before it great flocks of birds, which flew shrieking through the air. The atmosphere was murky and heavy, and it seemed hard to breathe. In the heart of this cloud they could make out strange shapes, which seemed to gyrate in eccentric circles.

"By Heaven! Ramon, you are in the right," cried Velasquez. "Where shall we find shelter from the storm?"

"I wish we were in the mountain," replied the lad, "and I would be able to find a hiding-place, and that right quickly. But there is no refuge here."

The whole camp was now in confusion, and the Mexicans and Indians were running to and fro, seeking to get their animals out of the way before the storm burst upon them. Ramon alone, of all the party, did not seem to fear, but with his arms folded on his breast watched the approach of the storm. The black cloud rolled up in dense splendor, with flashes of light through it here and there, and the lips of the boy parted in the low exclamation:

"How grand!"

"Why, you cursed young devil, any one would say you were glad to see it come," hissed Velasquez, who was half beside himself with fear. "How shall we get cover from it?"

"Faith, it is nothing more than wind and rain, and I can see no chance of cover here. There is nothing for it but to take it as it comes. See, capitano, how the bands of silver light up the dense black cloud, and—"

"I am half inclined to split your head with my saber," howled Velasquez. "Where shall we hide from it?"

"I tell you that you can't hide from it. When it comes, wrap your head in your serape and sit still until the storm is over. As I have no serape to cover me, I will borrow one."

And he snatched a gaudy scarlet cloak from the shoulder of a lancer who was hurrying toward the woods. The man turned on him like a tiger, but the boy threw the cloak at his feet and leveled his carbine across it.

"I have a use for this serape, seror," he said, in his peculiar, flute-like tones. "If you have a better right to it than I, you have only to come and take it."

The man recoiled before the leveled weapon.

daunted by the fierce black eye which looked down the deadly tube.

"Come to me after the storm is over and you shall have your own again," declared the boy, in a mocking tone. "For the present, you must excuse me if I retain possession of it. I will be careful of it."

The man went away snarling, but too cowardly to take back his lost property, and Ramon picked it up and settled it over his shoulders with his low laugh, and turned again to look at the sky.

"It is almost time," he muttered, "I wish I had something to guide me. As for those Indian brutes; bah—let them go!"

And turning quickly, he plunged into the woods close to the spot where the bound captive lay. Scarcely had he done so when one of those terrible storms which often rage upon the Texan plains, burst suddenly upon the party.

CHAPTER X.

DONE IN THE DARKNESS—THE PRISONER ESCAPES—A DESPERATE DUEL—BLACK VULTURE'S VENGEANCE.

RED SPUR RALPH had long ago given himself up for lost. The peculiar way in which he had been addressed by the young Mexican had for a moment given him hope, for he knew Rainbow Rube, Elegant Ed and the Weasel would do all in their power for him, but there was little they could do in his present strait. He was perfectly aware that the Vulture was only waiting for night to come to give him to the torture, and the storm which burst so suddenly upon him had only given him a respite for a few moments.

The three Indians remained at their posts, immovable as the Roman sentinels at the gates of Pompeii. The only thing they knew was obedience; they had been placed there by the chief, and only the order of that chief or sudden death would induce them to leave it. They only drew their blankets closer about their heads and stood firmly while the trees bent and rocked before the pitiless power of the wind and the drenching rain ran down their bodies in torrents.

The Mexicans and Indians had fled to the other side of the *motte*, out of reach of any tree which might fall and were crouching under their blankets, while the horses shivered in a close group near them.

It was now intensely dark. The flashes of light which seemed to pierce the gloom before were no longer seen, and, strange to say, there was no lightning. In the distance they could hear the rumbling of thunder, but where they lay the rain came down slanting, at an angle of forty-five degrees, driven by the furious wind, the roar of which drowned every other sound.

In that moment of wild dismay the Indian guards were not surprised when a man came stumbling into the opening where Red Spur lay, and actually fell over his body. The guards made a dash at him, when he hurled at them a choice selection of Mexican vituperation, and

declared that he would not move an inch until the storm was over.

"Who you?" snarled Big Wolf, for he could see nothing in the darkness. "Go away, or me kill."

"If you touch me it will be all the worse for you," howled the Mexican.

"Go away, I say!" roared Big Wolf.

"Mother Mary, where shall I go?"

"Go away from this!" repeated Big Wolf, making a "prod" with his spear in the darkness and drawing a howl of rage from the Mexican. "Me watch here; me on guard."

There was no reply, and the fellow, whoever it was, had evidently slunk away in the darkness.

But in the moment while he lay prostrate on the body of Red Spur a strange thing had happened. With a celerity which spoke well for his adroitness the bonds upon the hands of the young prisoner had been cut, and a knife thrust into his hand even as he lay, and by moving his feet a little he could feel that they were free too.

He did not spring up at once or move his hands or feet from their position.

The suspicions of Big Wolf might have been aroused, and if so he would make investigation.

Such indeed proved to be the case, for he felt the hand of the Indian upon his ankles, which were yet tightly bound together. Although Big Wolf could see nothing in the darkness, he could feel that the cords were there. He passed his hand along the body of his prisoner until he reached the left arm, which he found stretched out. It was well for him that at this point he became satisfied, for had he pursued his investigation to the other arm the long knife in the hand of the prisoner would have been plunged into his heart.

"I wish you would keep your dirty paws out of my face," cried Red Spur, in an angry tone. "It's bad enough to lie here in this way without that, curse you!"

Big Wolf answered by a grunt, and drawing his body to its full height, he again leaned upon his spear. With cat-like caution Red Spur raised himself and with a single cut severed the bonds upon his ankles.

Still the storm raged.

There came a sudden rush, a cry of agony, and a tree which came crashing down buried one of the Indian guards beneath it. Big Wolf and his companion sprung to his aid and succeeded in lifting the tree from the body. He gasped once or twice and died. The grim warrior placed his hand upon the breast of the fallen man and waited until it beat no more, and then turned to his companion.

"He is dead," he said. "Lay him down, for he was a brave warrior. The outlaw Apaches will mourn for him when they have time. When the breath of the Great Spirit is heard no more, we will make the heart of the Vulture sad."

The two stern men turned back to guard their prisoner, whom they had forgotten for the moment. Big Wolf took his spear and felt about for the prostrate man, but the spear touched nothing except the trees.

"Is Red Spur a fool that he should laugh at a

warrior?" he called, angrily. "Speak, white dog."

There was no reply.

Big Wolf threw down his spear and groped about on the earth until he touched one of the trees to which the prisoner was bound and chucked as he found the lariat still about it.

"He shall pay for this in the hour of torture," hissed the warrior, as he laid his hand upon the lariat to follow it to the place where his prisoner lay. He had scarcely done so when he gave utterance to a demoniac yell, as he found the lariat loose in his hand.

The prisoner had escaped.

Big Wolf was a slave to duty, and although he felt that he had guarded his prisoner well, he was perfectly aware that the Vulture would never pardon him, and that in strict justice he had no right to ask mercy.

There was no hope for him unless he could place the Red Spur again in the hands of his master.

He stood a moment in doubt, and then, catching up the spear, and feeling that his knife was in his girdle, he bounded away toward the south pass, in which he was certain his enemies would seek refuge.

The Indian was half frantic, for he felt that the outlaw chief would say that he had been unfaithful to his trust. The force of the wind and rain was terrible, and it was with difficulty he could make any head against it, but still he pushed on, biting his lips until the blood spurted from them.

When he had reached a spot which seemed to him in the darkness to be near the entrance to the pass, he stopped, and dropping upon the grass, waited with bated breath for the coming of his escaping prisoner.

The reasoning of the Indian was good. Out on the prairie there was no chance for escape; once joined with his friends, Red Spur could give them the aid of his strong arm in beating back the combined force of Indians and Mexicans.

Big Wolf was a man of giant build, and had the utmost confidence that if he once got the young man in his grasp he could overpower and carry him back to the torture which he was trying to escape.

He had been lying there only a few moments when he became conscious not only that the storm was abating, but that there was some one, whom he could not tell in the darkness, lying near at hand, and he had no doubt that it was the man he sought.

He began to work himself along the earth like a serpent in the direction of the sound, with his hand upon his knife, ready for action. Then he stopped again and listened, but the deep breathing which he had heard a moment before could no longer be distinguished, and he had no guide.

He began to suspect that his presence was known to his enemy, and that he was on the watch.

Big Wolf knew well that with Red Spur on his guard he would have no easy conquest, but must battle hard if he won, for, while Red Spur was not as strong of limb as himself, he possessed wonderful agility, and if he had secured

a weapon the chances were equal in the darkness.

He gave up the idea of carrying Red Spur back alive. If he waited for that his enemy might escape again, and, while Black Vulture might forgive him if he saw the dead body of his enemy, he would be pitiless if that enemy escaped.

He lay silent and waited, and it became a question which would first give himself away by making a sound.

The enemy of Big Wolf, whoever it was, became tired first.

He made an incautious movement, which showed his position, and Big Wolf noiselessly gained his feet and sprung forward. At the same moment his enemy arose, and the two men closed in a deadly grapple and began a furious duel, the more terrible from the utter silence with which it was fought.

Each had caught the other by the left wrist and plied the knife with the right. Terrible wounds were given and taken without a groan, but at last a blow touched the life of the unknown adversary of Big Wolf, and he dropped without a groan at the feet of the man with whom he had fought so bravely.

Big Wolf would have dragged his enemy back to camp, but he felt that his strength was insufficient. His blood was flowing fast, and he gave utterance to three signal yells, the well-known rallying cry of the outlaw Apaches, and was satisfied when an answer came back from the direction of the *molte*. In a moment the beat of many hoofs could be heard, and he again shouted to guide them, and Black Vulture, followed by twenty or thirty of his band, came dashing up at full speed.

"I heard the war-cry of Big Wolf," shouted the chief, bending in the saddle. "What is he doing here, when I set him to guard Red Spur yonder?"

"Red Spur escaped and Big Wolf followed," was the answer. "Big Wolf knew that by the law of the band he was guilty and must die if the prisoner escaped. He found Red Spur here, and we fought. He was too strong for me to take alive, and I killed him."

"Ha!" cried Black Vulture. "If Big Wolf has done this, the fault is great; but he shall not die. Who will make a light here, that we may see?"

At this moment they were joined by a party of Mexicans, one of whom carried a sliding lantern. He held it out to the chief, who dismounted and approached Big Wolf, who had sunk upon one knee, unable to stand from loss of blood. The Vulture flashed the light upon him and saw that he was indeed terribly injured, and must have fought gallantly to receive such wounds.

"The blood of a warrior is good to the eyes of a chief," declared the Vulture, "when his blood has been shed in battle. Where is the body of Red Spur?"

Big Wolf indicated a dark form stretched upon the grass, and the chief stepped away to look at the handiwork of his warrior. As the light fell upon the mangled form he uttered a savage howl, for the man who lay there was

Lone Dog, his last remaining brother, one of the three guards of the white prisoner.

Big Wolf had started to his feet. He knew now that Lone Dog, actuated by the same motive as himself, had set out to cut off the retreat of his prisoner, and they had met in the darkness with this fatal result.

Black Vulture turned with his ax in his hand, and folding his arms across his bloody breast, the wounded warrior waited for the blow. It fell, and the heavy ax was buried to the eye in the brain of the man who had made such a fatal mistake.

"It is the fault of Red Spur," screamed the chief, shaking the bloody ax at the cliff. "Woe to him when we meet,"

CHAPTER XI.

A SCOUTING EXPEDITION—AN UNEXPECTED RE- CONTER—DEATH OF GIL PEREZ.

THE death of the two warriors had made an indelible impression upon the outlaw chief. Although he had slain Big Wolf with his own hand, he knew that it would not have been necessary to sacrifice him but for Red Spur Ralph.

As he turned his savage face from side to side his eyes met those of Ramon the Runner, and he saw in them an expression which he did not understand. But that he knew that the boy could have no reason for delighting in the slaughter of his friends, he would have said that he was laughing at him.

He strode quickly up to the lad and caught him by the shoulder. Ramon threw off his hand with a savage exclamation and laid his hand upon a weapon; but Velasquez interposed.

"You young hell-cat!" he exclaimed. "What do you mean? Would you strike the Vulture, who is our best friend?"

"The Vulture or any one else who lays a hand on me in anger," was the reply of the lad. "Curse him, what does he mean by seizing me in that way?"

A grim smile passed over the face of the Vulture and it was plain that the savage manner of the boy pleased him and had allayed his suspicions.

"Say no more," he declared; "I thought the boy laughed because my warriors lay dead, but I must be wrong. Let us go and take vengeance upon those who alone are to blame for all the wrong which has been done. And to show that he means to be friendly, let the boy lead us."

"I am ready enough to do that, but it seems foolish to run into the jaws of the lion without sending out scouts to see how the land lies," replied Ramon.

"That is only right," replied the chief. "Who then will lead the way and tell us where we may best strike the young rangers?"

Nobody spoke.

"You don't seem to talk all at once," sneered Ramon, looking at the Mexicans with an amused smile. "Well, let a boy shame you, then. I will go and in half an hour I will be back with news."

"You cowards," hissed Velasquez. "Would you let the boy go out alone?"

"I will go with him, if you wish it," averred Gil Perez.

"Go, then; you have something to revenge upon these young dogs in your own person," declared Velasquez.

"Out of the saddle, then," commanded Ramon. "What we do must be done on foot. Forward, worthy Senor Perez, and if I go first it is only to show you the way."

The two glided away in the darkness, Gil Perez following like a serpent on the trail of the bold-hearted boy. They entered the mountain pass bravely. Not a sound disturbed the awful stillness and the gulch swallowed them up. Ramon went on with the assured step of one who knew his ground, and they suddenly came out upon a broad plateau, bathed in the white rays of the moon, which had risen above the mountain side, for the storm had broken. They could even make out the figures of the horses and men of the allied bands, as they stood in silence, waiting for the coming of the spies they had sent out.

Ramon did not give his companion long to think, but touching him on the arm made a sign to follow. He obeyed in silence and the two quickly reached a point from which they could look down upon the camp of the young rangers pitched near Clear Spring.

"The young demons are there," muttered Gil Perez, clutching at the pistols in his belt. "By my life, I would give much to put a bullet through the heart of one man in yonder party, and that is the man they call Dick Merry."

"Why do you hate him in particular?" demanded Ramon.

"Because he insulted me out yonder," replied Gil Perez. "He would have seen me treated worse than a peon."

"Haven't you made a little mistake, Gil Perez?" inquired the boy. "I know all about that matter, though you think I don't. You alone, of all the party, escaped the ordeal of running the gantlet, and but for Captain Merry you would be a dead man, for the greasy scout wanted to kill you."

"You know too much," replied Perez, "and such bright boys do not live long."

"They live longer than those who threaten them, sometimes," was the answer of the lad. "Don't let us waste breath about it, Senor Perez, but make our observations and get back to camp. Will you stay here and let me creep up on them, or will you go ahead?"

"You seem to know the ground well," replied Perez. "Go ahead yourself."

Ramon glided away in the moonlight, and Gil Perez, lying in the shadow of the rock, watched the camp of the rangers. They seemed to be quite at their ease, though ready for a fight, as each sat with his rifle across his knees; but at the same time their eyes were roving over the rocks, as if in search of an enemy, and there was no doubt that some of their number were on a scout.

"I wouldn't like to meet Rainbow Rube now," muttered Perez. "He hates me, and he has good reason to do so, and if he met me alone one or the other would have to go down."

"Stand up, you durned spider," cried out a savage voice in his ear, and a rough hand was

laid upon his shoulder. "I reckon ye'r a bird I've bin lookin' arter some time."

Gil Perez started to his feet with the snarl of an angry tiger brought to bay, for he knew too well the voice of Rainbow Rube.

The hunter was not alone, for at his side stood Elegant Ed, his thick lips parted in a derisive smile and his black eyes sparkling like stars in the moonlight. He reached out his long arm and snatched the pistols of Gil Perez from his belt.

"We won't have any shooting here," he declared, quietly. "What you do must be done with the naked steel."

"Thet suits me," replied Rube, as he bared his shining bowie. "Git out yer sticker, Greaser; you an' me hev an account to settle thet won't keep."

"Don't go for him yet, Rube," said Elegant Ed. "Maybe he can tell us something that will be of more use to us than his scalp."

"You are brave fellows," sneered Gil Perez. "Two of you attack one man and take away his weapons, and then laugh at him. Ten thousand curses on you, I will fight either of you alone."

"We'll give you that chance, anyhow," was the answer of Ed, "but I've got a few questions to ask you first, and if you don't answer we'll give you such a death as your cowardly hounds give to brave men when they are overpowered by numbers. First, where is Red Spur?"

"I only wish I knew, myself," was the reply. "The fellow managed to make his escape in the storm and where he is I know no more than you do."

"You are not lying?"

"No; for a wonder, I am telling the truth. It would suit me better to be able to say that we had cut him into inch pieces. What next?"

"The next is—you remember the girl for whom we had the fight when Red Spur was taken?"

"Yes, curse her, I remember too well, for she was a demon in the form of woman."

"Where is she?" demanded Ed.

"Why, ten thousand curses on her head, didn't she escape up the pass while we were fighting? You helped her up the rocks yourself, Rube and you know it. Why in the name of the demons do you ask me about her?"

"Do you pretend you haven't seen her?"

"I have not."

"I don't believe the cuss is lying this time, though lying comes kinder nat'ral to him," declared Rube. "Mebbe the gal is all right, arter all, Ed."

"You remember her oath, Rube. When Prairie Belle takes an oath, it means business. If Red Spur has escaped, ten to one Belle had something to do with it, for she's cunning as the Old Nick. Well, it seems Perez don't mean to help us out, so settle your scores. I draw out."

"You don't mean to let him murder me after I've answered your questions?" screamed Perez.

"You said you'd fight either of us, didn't you?" demanded Ed. "What more do you want?"

But Gil Perez hesitated. He knew well that

the man before him had great cause to hate him and that when their knives crossed, it must be a duel to the death.

But the prairie man did not move; only he crossed his arms upon his bosom, the right hand clasping the hilt of a bowie which gleamed strangely in the pale moonlight and seemed of terrible length.

"There war two men," he said, "Gil Perez an' Odo Velasquez, thet I've follered a long time. I ain't hed a fair chance at either on 'em afore, an' now I've got it, an' I don't mean ter give it up."

"Have your way, then," cried Gil Perez, suddenly drawing his bowie and making a spring at the prairie-man. "But hold on; suppose I win in this fight—what then?"

"I'll give you an hour's run, and then you've got a worse enemy on your track than even Rainbow Rube," replied Ed.

"But you let me go free for this time?"

"Yes."

Gil Perez made a sudden leap and struck with vicious earnestness at the heart of the prairie-man. Rube laughed as he turned aside the blow, delivered a cut in return, and leaped out of distance.

Elegant Ed had never realized, until he saw this fight, that Rube was such a master of his weapon.

He was always just out of reach when Gil Perez struck, and yet near enough to make an effective return.

Gil Perez was soon bleeding from several wounds, and yet he fought on with a desperation worthy of his name as a borderman.

"Durn my hide," cried Rube, admiringly, "ef I didn't hate yer so, Perez, I'd like ter shake hands with you—I would, by gracious! Dunno, on the hull, but I'll let yer throw up yer hands an' make yer pris'ner."

Gil Perez uttered a taunting laugh, made a leap, getting inside Rube's guard for a moment, and aimed a thrust which would have ended the battle; but with a supple twist of the body Rube partly eluded the blow, although a deep gash was inflicted on his side. Then he thrust in return, and the blade of his weapon disappeared in the bosom of the Mexican, who fell without a sigh.

At the same moment, Elegant Ed sprung forward and dragged from the shadow of a rock the slight form of Ramon the Runner.

"Now, you young spy," he cried, in a savage tone, "we'll settle with you!"

Ramon only answered by a taunting laugh, and looked Elegant Ed unflinchingly in the eye.

CHAPTER XII.

PLUNGED INTO THE GULCH—THE DEATH-SONG OF THE DEAD.

THE allied bands of Velasquez and the Vulture remained quietly on the prairie. They had heard nothing from the mountain, and began to think that the adventurous men must have fallen into an ambush, when a quick step was heard and Ramon the Runner came dashing in among them.

"Here I am, great Velasquez," he exclaimed. "Get ready your weapons and we'll make it red-hot for the young rangers."

"Where is Gil Perez?" demanded the outlaw leader.

"Gil Perez has gone to the happy hunting-grounds. We met two men up there, Elegant Ed and the man called Rainbow Rube and Gil Perez was killed. I trusted to my heels as soon as I got a chance and here I am, and all I've got to say is, if you are spoiling for a fight, the sooner you get to work the better."

"Are the rangers there?"

"Yes, camped at Clear Spring."

There was a manifest movement of alarm among the Mexicans. Plainly, they did not like the idea of having anything to do with Clear Spring since their last battle there, but Velasquez turned on them with flashing eyes.

"Amigos," he exclaimed, fiercely, "let me tell you a thing. In our last battle here you behaved badly and ran like ladrones as you are. But look you; I shall speak to the Vulture and tell him that if you give back a foot, he and his men have instructions to kill you. Are you ready now, my braves?"

The outlaws said nothing, but wished themselves anywhere else. To tell the truth, the fight had been pretty well taken out of them lately and they were anxious to seek for distinction in other fields. But there was nothing for it except to fight, with the eyes of their savage leader on them and the certainty that the outlaw Apaches would cut them down without mercy if they flinched.

"How shall we attack?" inquired Velasquez, turning to Ramon.

"On foot, for we can't get at them with the horses. My idea would be to take the beasts into the pass and leave them there under guard and then go ahead on foot."

"It is the best way; lead on," said the Vulture.

Ramon hurried away with a light step and was quickly followed by the party and in a few moments all were in the pass. The castle-like rocks around looked strangely gloomy to the Mexicans, and they cast startled glances aloft from time to time. Not a sound disturbed the awful stillness, and if the young rangers had any one on guard they were not in this vicinity. The attacking party consisted of at least fifty Apaches and about thirty Mexicans, long odds with which to attack the party of Texan boys, but not much greater odds than the Texans were accustomed to meet. They went up the pass in silence, Ramon in the lead, followed by a section of Indians led by the Vulture's sub-chief; next the Mexicans, with Velasquez and the Vulture in the rear, and then the balance of the Indians. Three wounded men had been left in the pass below with the horses. They reached the broad plateau, when Ramon paused and beckoned his leader to approach, and as he did so he saw at his feet the ghastly form of Gil Perez, with his garments soaked in blood.

"That is only one thing more to count against these dogs," whispered the outlaw. "Where are they?"

Ramon silently pointed down into the pass. The young rangers were still there, but they

seemed, in a measure, to have relaxed their vigilance. Two or three had weapons in their hands, and were pacing to and fro, but by far the greater portion lay sleeping about the spring. A triumphant grin distorted the savage countenance of the Vulture.

"The Great Spirit wills it that I shall have vengeance for the death of my warriors," he murmured. "Now, brave white boy, tell us what to do."

"We must surround them before we attack, or they will get to their horses and run," was the answer. "Take twenty of your braves and follow me, and I will lead you to a place where you can attack them when the signal is given. Where is Velasquez? Now, mark what I say. Send Pedro Gomez, with fifteen men, to the West Pass, and let them stand there with their weapons ready, and advance at the signal, for the rangers may try to escape that way. Now then, chief, follow me."

Vulture had rapidly selected the men he wished to take with him, and falling into Indian file, with the Runner ahead, they glided away in silence. The path by which he took them was a dismal one, and caution was needed, as the bare rocks did not easily conceal the tread of so many feet. The grim warriors, with their weapons bare, trod noiselessly on the heels of the wily young Mexican, under the shadow of the cliffs, until they came to a place where a narrow path led along the face of the rocks beside the deep ravine into which the strange apparition had leaped when pursued by Red Spur and Merry. It was a dangerous place, and a single misstep would plunge a man down into the horrible depths. Ramon entered it with a firm step, and the Indians, not to be outdone by a boy, followed quickly, although some of them, if the truth must be told, crowded the wall closely as they passed along.

In the center of the path a rock jutted out in such a manner that it seemed as if the way was blocked. Ramon made a signal to the Indian who followed to watch his motions, and reaching up to the rock above, caught a projecting point and swung himself past the angle. In doing so his feet hung over an abyss which seemed of fathomless depth.

"Good heart," muttered the Vulture. "He has no fear."

The Indians were now all upon the shelf except the Vulture and he was about to follow, when a rope which seemed to have been hidden along the base of the wall, suddenly rose, as if pulled by unseen hands and in the twinkling of an eye the Apaches were swept off the shelf into the horrible depths. Black Vulture alone remained. He stood on the other side, his eyes half starting from their sockets, looking with horror into the dismal gulf down which his companions had disappeared. They were blood-thirsty wretches, no doubt, and well deserved the fate which had been meted out to them, but they were brave warriors and had fought according to their lights. Black Vulture started back with a cry of horror, when the face of Ramon the Runner appeared around the angle of the rock.

"Why don't you come on!" he whispered.

"Are you afraid— Holy virgin, they are gone!"

"Take care, boy," hissed the Vulture. "My warriors are all gone—pushed into the hole by the larvat."

"I don't know how I escaped," gasped the boy, as he reached out with his dagger and cut the rope. "It is a piece of cursed villainy, if I ever saw one. Who do y^e suppose set this trap?"

"It is the work of the young rangers or the Spirits of Clear Spring," answered the Indian. "Can you get back to me?"

"I am not afraid, now that the rope is cut," answered Ramon, as he swung himself round the angle. "What will you do now?"

"Twenty brave warriors gone," groaned the Vulture, as he peered into the black depths of the ravine. "They were men who have followed me in many battles, and have not failed me when danger was near. I will go for the others, and we will avenge them."

Ramon led the way on a rapid run, and quickly reached the spot where the rest of the Indians and the balance of the men of Velasquez were waiting for orders. The guerilla uttered a low cry of surprise as he saw the two without the rest of the band.

"Waste no words," said the chief. "My men are gone, but I am not all alone. Sons of the Apache, follow me!"

The Indians silently ranged themselves behind him, and Ramon again took the lead.

"Seek another pass!" commanded the chief. "I will not risk my braves in that place again."

"Just as you say, chief," replied the boy. "There is another way, but it is more exposed, and we might be seen. It will bring us closer to the enemy, however."

He hurried his steps now, and the Indians followed as quickly, eager for revenge upon the men whom they believed had set the trap into which so many of their men had gone to their deaths. The band of Black Vulture had lived strange lives; every man's hand against them, and the loss of any of their number was one not easily replaced, for there is no calamity so terrible to the true Indian, next to dishonor on the field of battle, as outlawry, and it was not easy to recruit such a band, once depleted. No one knew this better than Black Vulture, and his heart was torn with conflicting emotions as he trod on in silence close to the heels of Ramon the Runner.

"Take care, young boy," he muttered; "if anything happens to the braves of Black Vulture, he will think that you have betrayed us, and then death to you."

Ramon stopped suddenly, with his hand on a weapon.

"Now listen to me, Black Vulture," he said, angrily. "You may say what you like as long as you do not accuse me of treachery, but if you hint at that again I will bury my steel in your heart."

"Hah!" ejaculated the Vulture. "The boy has the heart of a tiger. Lead on; I trust you."

"Better take the lead yourself," growled the boy. "I am not used to being treated like a lardrone, and by the Virgin, I will not endure

it from any man on earth. Hark! What is that?"

A deep, hollow groan was heard, which seemed to issue from the bowels of the earth, and the Indians paused and looked quickly at the deep fissure, by the side of which the track lay. Then a deeper sound succeeded, the Indian death-chant, rolling up out of the abyss, and with a hoarse cry Black Vulture sprang to the side of the chasm and looked down upon a wonderful sight, and one which filled him with rage and the desire for revenge.

On a rocky shelf below, their feet banging over the deeper abyss, sat the men who had fallen from the cliff. Their faces were partly lifted in the clear moonlight, and they were dead, and yet from their pale lips pealed the death-song of the Apache, and Black Vulture covered his face and staggered back.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SPIRIT BAND—THE LAST OF BLACK VULTURE'S MEN.

THE Indian is naturally superstitious, and Black Vulture was no exception to the rule.

If he had been put upon his oath, he would have sworn that he saw the lips of the dead move, and heard the death-song chanted by them. One after another the band looked down into the chasm, and started back, and the last one to look down was Ramon, the Runner, whose dark face grew livid as he too fell back.

"Let us leave this thrice accursed place," he gasped. "I have heard before that there was a spell upon it, and now I know it. Be warned by me, Black Vulture; take your braves, while any are left, and leave us to our fate, for we shall perish, man by man."

"And if we die, let it be like men, and not black-hearted cowards," was the fierce reply. "Lead on, I say!"

"Have your way, then," replied the boy, as he loosened his knife in its sheath. "I don't mean to go back myself, but I thought perhaps you had had enough of it."

He stepped forward quickly and entered a dark defile, which he followed for a short distance, when he stopped suddenly and made a signal to the chief to advance. He did so, and peering through the vines which partly shaded the entrance to the valley, saw that he was within a hundred yards of the camp of the young rangers. They were lying at their ease, but the Indian was surprised to see that more than half their number were missing.

"Stay here," whispered Ramon in the ear of the chief. "I go to lead Velasquez by another path. When he is ready, you will see a blue light flash up on the top of yonder rock, and when it goes out charge with all your men."

The chief nodded, for now that he had his enemies before him he no longer felt fear, and Ramon glided away in silence and quickly reached the side of the outlaw Velasquez, as he stood waiting on the mountain side.

"All are ready except your men, Velasquez," asserted the boy. "Let them prepare their weapons and follow me, but beware that not a shot is fired until I give the word."

"I will kill the man who is careless enough to put success in peril," replied Velasquez.

As the band filed away, a man who had been lying on his face in the shadow of a great rock, rose silently and looked after them. When the last man had disappeared, he came out from behind the rock, followed by another person, and Elegant Ed followed by the Weasel were revealed.

"All goes well, Weasel," he whispered. "Oh, isn't our work being done to our hands? They think to catch us napping, but they little know the wiles of the Spirit of Clear Spring."

"It looks as if I should have a chance to take revenge for the death of my dear father," replied the Weasel. "Twice to-night I have been tempted to kill Velasquez when I had a fair shot at twenty paces, but I remembered how much was at stake and held my fire. That boy puzzles me, though; there is something about him which is familiar."

Elegant Ed turned a strange look upon the speaker, and his somber face was lighted up by a peculiar smile.

"You must not forget what I told the rest, to beware that no harm comes to Ramon the Runner. When this thing is over, I will show you a wonder."

"The little Greaser ought to have his hair lifted," replied Weasel.

"That may be, but as it is, don't you see he is doing our work for us? Could we separate these fellows as he is doing now, if we tried?"

"I don't know as we could; no thanks to him, though," replied Weasel.

"I think I will prove to you, before we get through, that the young Greaser is of more use to us alive than dead. But we are losing time; come along."

He advanced a few paces and at a point where the strange crevice lay in the deepest shadows, suddenly caught the Weasel in his arms and dropped into the gulf. Weasel uttered a cry, but before he could get out another he was far down the depths of the crevice descending with a gliding motion clasped to the broad breast of his strange companion. A moment more and he felt the hard rock beneath his feet and Elegant Ed caught him by the arm.

"Not a word," he whispered, "but let me lead you."

The Weasel was not easily frightened and followed his leader through the darkness which he could almost feel. The air was peculiarly heavy and for a moment the boy found it difficult to breathe, but that soon passed off and a fresh breeze was blowing in his face, and he could see a glimmer of light before him. Five minutes later they stood upon a rocky shelf, screened by a creeping vine, and were looking into the dark ravine where Black Vulture and his men were waiting in silence for the signal to advance.

"If it were any other men except the band of Black Vulture I could pity them," whispered Elegant Ed, "but these men have too much blood to answer for. Look there, Weasel."

Out of the pass below marched a strange band, the Indians who had plunged into the

depths of the ravine and whose death-song Black Vulture had heard. They marched each with his elbow raised, covering his face, but their bodies were covered with bloody spots here and there, and the men of Black Vulture, paralyzed with fear, watched their slow advance.

The outlaw chief during his adventurous life had faced many dangers and had met them bravely.

Had a hundred white rangers appeared he would have fought while his breath lasted and though overcome, would have died grim, but this was a sight for which he was not prepared, and he trembled in every limb as the band of the dead marched on.

Silently they ranged themselves along the side of the pass, close to the trembling warriors, who were exactly equal in number, without counting the chief.

Each of the spirit warriors raised his right hand and beckoned to the Apache opposite to come to him.

Not one of them thought of disobeying, although each felt that to step forward was death.

In awful silence they advanced with slow, hesitating steps, as the charmed bird approaches when drawn by the glittering eye of the serpent. Weasel Wilson, who had never seen such a sight as this, scarcely breathed, and clutched the arm of Elegant Ed with convulsive energy. The strange man shook off his hand and pointed down into the glen.

The hand of each of the spirit warriors held a keen ax, which glittered in the rays of the moon.

Closer and closer came the doomed men, while the spirit band, their faces still covered by the folds of their blankets, stood like statues, awaiting them, and Black Vulture was alone, looking in agony on the awful scene.

Suddenly, as the outlaw band came within reach, the twenty axes were lifted, a blow, which seemed but one, sounded in the glen, and the doomed warriors lay dead at the feet of the men who in life had been their companions; and with a shriek of terror Black Vulture bounded up the glen alone. Not a hand was lifted to stop him in his mad flight, and the spirit band, still grasping their bloody axes, filed silently down the glen and were gone.

"See here, old man," whispered Weasel Wilson, "can I speak now?"

"You seem to be speaking, don't you?" growled the oddity. "Yes, you may speak all you like. How did that suit you?"

"Are they really all dead, or am I dreaming?"

"If you think they are not dead, all you've got to do is to go down there and lift their hair, that's all I've got to say. But here, let me whisper."

Weasel bent his head, and the strange recluse whispered a brief sentence. Weasel gave vent to a short whistle of astonishment.

"I see," he exclaimed. "But don't do it any more, Ed; it's awful trying on the nervous system."

"I reckon Black Vulture thinks so, anyhow," replied the mountaineer, with a light laugh.

"Let's be getting; things will be mighty busy around here pretty soon."

"What's the idea of letting the Vulture get away?"

"Oh never mind that. I've got a notion about him because I've got the most laid up against him. I wonder if that surround is nearly made?"

The two sprung down from the shelf and were quickly out of sight in the dark pass, following on the trail taken by the spirit band. Passing the dead Apaches, Weasel looked at them and was satisfied that the work was well done; not a man of them stirred and he hurried on after Elegant Ed, who led the way quickly and with little caution through the dark defile. He appeared to have little or no fear, now that the Indians were out of the way, and the Specter Band had no terrors for him. With an agile tread he hurried on, until they stood over the place where Pedro Gomez and his men guarded the west pass.

It was a different party from the brave Indian band who lay dead near the camp of the rangers, for they were shaking in their gaudy trappings until their buttons fairly rattled, and there was scarcely a man of the party who would not have given his chance of paradise to be in the saddle and riding hard for the Mexican border.

"By Santiago," muttered one strapping Chihuahuan, as he looked furtively about him, "Velasquez does well to plant us in the pass, directly in the track of these furious Texans. Suppose they should make an attempt to escape, where would we be then?"

"About where you are now, my braves," declared a quiet voice, and there stepped out into view fifteen gallant young rangers with their rifles ready and Captain Merry at their head. "Throw up your hands, and if a man of you dares make a noise louder than a wood tick crawling on a Digger, he'll never peep again."

There was no hesitation on the part of the Mexicans. With a unanimity which was good to see, fifteen pair of hands went up into the air and the work was done.

"Jump down there, Weasel, you and Elegant Ed, and tie these skunks," cried Merry. "I'd rather handle a lot of polecats."

The two passed in among the Mexicans, and taking their own lariats, soon trussed them up like turkeys ready for the market and the rangers laughed heartily, but not loud enough to make any noise. Then each of the young men led a Mexican away into the bushes, and silence reigned in West Pass. Something new was afoot.

CHAPTER XIV.

AN EMPTY NEST—ATTACKED BY FRIENDS—BLACK VULTURE'S GALLANT DEATH.

RAMON the Runner led the band of Velasquez by dark and devious passes until they crossed the canyon above Clear Spring and came out on the other side and it looked as though the surround was complete.

"You have done nobly, Ramon," declared Velasquez, patting the boy on the shoulder.

"Were you a woman I should fall in love with you, for you are a greater devil than I am."

"No, no," replied Ramon, modestly. "That would be impossible."

The guerrilla looked at the boy sharply to see if there was any hidden meaning in his words, but he looked so innocent that he concluded that it meant nothing, and he turned his glance toward the camp of the rangers. The ground around Clear Spring now lay bathed in shadow and he could no longer see the forms of the rangers, but doubted not they were there.

"It is nearly time to make the charge," whispered Ramon. "When you see the blue light gleaming on yonder rock, upon them bravely and you will win the fight."

Ramon disappeared and the Mexicans waited with bated breath for the signal to flash out from the high rock. No one was more eager for the onslaught than Velasquez, yet this place had always seemed fatal to him since the hour when he butchered the companions of Rainbow Rube in the opening beside Clear Spring. Everything he had done here since that time had ended in evil, but he was satisfied that Prairie Belle was with the young rangers, and was determined to possess her and at the same time mete out vengeance to the men who had made him suffer such loss.

"Velasquez, Velasquez, Velasquez!" cried a hollow voice.

The guerrilla started and looked quickly about him.

"Who called me?" he demanded.

The Mexicans declared that not one of them had spoken, but all had heard the strange voice calling to their chief.

"It is only more of the cursed necromancy of this place," averred Velasquez, in an angry tone. "Who spoke, I say?"

"Look back to the hour when Clear Spring was red with the blood of innocent men," replied the voice which he had heard before. "That blood is calling for vengeance and it is near at hand."

"Woe be to the skin of the man who dares to play with me, if I find him," muttered Velasquez, as he strode away in the direction of the voice. As he did so he saw in his path the fleshless skeleton which had met Richard Merry, extending its bony arms toward him. He uttered a low cry and half drew his pistol, but remembered that a shot before the signal came would rouse the ranger camp and make his task more difficult; and springing forward, he attempted to seize the strange figure, but it slipped out of his grasp, and again that hollow, metallic laugh was heard. A second time Velasquez darted forward, but no sooner had he done so than he was met by a strange-looking ball, which exploded with a low report, and for a moment he was robbed of his strength by the fumes which entered his nostrils. When his clouded brain was again able to act, the figure had disappeared.

"There is the signal, mio capitano," cried one of the men.

Velasquez turned, and saw the blue light flash up for a moment on the top of the rock and instantly disappear.

The Mexicans grasped their weapons and dashed out on a run.

At the same time there debouched from the dark ravine, where the men of Black Vulture had met their death, the specter band, their gory axes ready, while from the West Pass charged the band of Pedro Gomez, all eager for the blood of the young rangers.

They met beside Clear Spring, but there was nothing here upon which to strike. The valley was vacant; not a ranger was in sight. There lay their blankets just as they had left them, but nothing more.

Velasquez, mad with rage, turned to vent his anger upon Ramon the Runner, who had again joined him, and caught him roughly by the hair, when to his surprise it came off in his hand, and from beneath the broad sombrero rolled down a mass of curling black hair, and he knew that Ramon the Runner was Prairie Belle. She made an agile spring, eluded two or three Mexicans who tried to seize her, and ran straight into the midst of the spirit band, who were coming up at their long Indian lope.

"Hold her fast, Apaches!" screamed Velasquez. "By Heaven, she has betrayed us, and we will show her what vengeance is."

The girl passed in among the Indians and was instantly seized by them, and the Indians continued their rapid advance, while on the other side the band of Gomez came charging on.

"Hold her fast," again shouted Velasquez. "All that has come to us to-night has been her doing. Ha! who is this?"

Flying down from one of the passes, his black hair floating in the wind and his eyes lit up by the lurid fires of madness, came Black Vulture, and threw himself among the Mexicans.

"Take care what you do, Velasquez," he shouted. "The men of Black Vulture are dead and their spirits strive with us."

Before Velasquez could make any reply a strange thing happened. Those they had thought to be their friends—the men of Pedro Gomez—came upon them from the west, and before they had time to think, half a dozen of their number lay dead upon the grass, and the assailing party were among them hewing them down without mercy.

"Fools!" screamed Velasquez, throwing himself in front of the leveled weapons. "See you not what you are doing? By Heaven, you are killing my men!"

A knife in the hands of a stalwart fellow, whose face was covered by a flapping sombrero, grazed his side, inflicting a deep gash, and a pistol was discharged, cutting a deep furrow along his cheek, and Velasquez sprung back out of reach. At the same moment the Mexican party was thrown into a huddle by the charge of the spirit band upon the other side.

"Saints be above us," cried a Mexican brigand, as he parried a blow from the weapon of one of the Indians. "They are Texans, every man."

"At them, my, heroes," shouted a mellow voice. "Give the dogs a taste of Texas steel. Remember the massacre of Clear Spring."

Velasquez recognized the voice as that of Prairie Belle, and through the smoke of battle

saw her in the midst of the specter band, a pistol in each hand, urging them on. Black Vulture, who was fighting by the side of Velasquez, saw her, too.

"That woman has done this," he screamed. "With one blow you shall see me take vengeance for my slaughtered brothers."

The only weapon he had was a huge club which he had picked up on the mountain. Whirling it above his head, he sprung into the midst of the specter band, dashing them right and left with the strength of a giant. He saw nothing save Prairie Belle, and nothing less than death would turn him aside. The spirit band went down man by man before the strokes of his mighty arm and he had almost reached the girl, who gave him two shots as he advanced, both of which pierced his broad breast. As Prairie Belle sprung back to elude him, her foot struck the body of a prostrate man, and she fell. Before she could gain her feet she was in the grasp of Black Vulture, who, in spite of the blows rained upon him from every side, seized her by the throat with a grasp so savage that the breath seemed to leave her body in an instant, when Elegant Ed came dashing through the midst of the band, and with a single slash of his broad bowie nearly severed Black Vulture's hand at the wrist, and the girl writhed out of his grasp and fell at his feet gasping for breath. The next moment Elegant Ed and the stalwart Indian outlaw were locked in a death-grapple.

To the ordinary observer it would have seemed that there was no chance for Elegant Ed in such a contest, but they did not dream of the wonderful muscular power which dwelt in his frame. In the death-hug of the mighty Apache he managed to free his right arm, still grasping the deadly bowie, and strike one powerful blow.

It was enough.

The broad hilt of the knife struck sharply against the ribs of the Indian, and with a single gasping cry he fell back, dead, and Elegant Ed sprung up and caught the silent form of Prairie Belle, just as a man clothed in Mexican garb broke through the Indians and sprung to her side.

"Touch her not!" cried Ed, savagely. "Living, she may be yours; dead, she is mine."

The Mexican dashed away his sombrero and revealed the handsome face of Red Spur Ralph.

"Take care of her, on your life, Ed," he cried. "If she does not recover, not one Mexican shall live to tell the story."

And grasping his weapons as he saw the blood coming back into the cheeks of Prairie Belle, he plunged again into the fight.

CHAPTER XV.

THE DARK MADE CLEAR—RED SPUR WINS A PRIZE—LAST WORDS.

A PART of the mystery was solved. The men in Mexican garb who had so fiercely attacked the guerrillas from the west were the young rangers, clothed in the garments of the Mexicans they had captured in West Pass.

Velasquez had begun to suspect this, and with a few determined men about him who were bound to sell their lives dearly, he was making a stubborn fight. Several of the boys were

bleeding, and Clarrie Lee was down, with a long gash in his shoulder, and Garryowen had his cheek laid open by a slashing blow from a machete, as he warded off a cut aimed at the head of his beloved captain.

Rube was there, fighting gallantly and making desperate efforts to reach Velasquez, who in this supreme moment found that the men he had abused and insulted while under his command were still ready to die for his sake.

"Back there!" cried the commanding voice of Captain Merry. "Here, handle your rifles. A man is a fool who throws his life away for a lot of Greasers."

The rangers sprung back to a rock near by, and in a moment rushed back with their rifles, which they had piled there before the capture of Pedro Gomez.

Weasel Wilson was with them.

"Look out, boys!" he shouted. "Hold! or I shall be tempted to shoot the man who kills Odo Velasquez before I get a shot at him!"

"Let him alone, boys!" shouted Captain Merry. "Leave him to Weasel and Rube; they'll account for him."

"I'll mark him, then!" screamed Weasel. "His right ear is too long; I'll crop it."

The rifle cracked, and with a perfect howl of rage the huge guerrilla threw up his hand to his ear and found a portion of it gone. The aim of the lad had been true.

"Oh, I can get you when I want you!" cried Weasel, dancing wildly about even while engaged in driving another ball into his rifle. "It's only a matter of time. Do you know who I am? I'm the son of the man you murdered by this spring with your own hand. The other ear, now."

Again the rifle cracked and again the ball went true to the mark.

"Oh, howly fly, Weasel!" cried Garryowen; "don't be such a devil. Shoot him, av ye will, but don't torture him."

"'Twasn't your father he killed, Garryowen," replied Weasel, as he poured in another charge. "I tell you there's no mercy for him."

Velasquez knew that his time had come, unless he could break through the ranks and get to the horses in the South Pass; and with a savage yell he bounded into the midst of the rangers, forced his way through them, and ran like a deer.

"There's your meat, Weasel," said Captain Merry quietly. "Go with him, Rube."

To the surprise of Velasquez, not a shot was fired as he plunged into the pass; but he could hear the patter of feet and knew that he was pursued.

He was a noble runner, and in ten minutes was crossing the plateau at a rapid run; and if he could cross the gulch, by placing the rocks between himself and his pursuers, he might escape.

He knew that the cleft was very wide, but he must chance it, for close behind him came the patter of feet and he knew that this time Weasel Wilson would shoot to kill. Before him lay the gully, and gathering speed as he rushed down the slope, he sprung out into the air.

His feet touched the rocks on the other side and he would have fallen backward, but he

clutched a short shrub which grew on the bank. But the effort he made threw his feet from under him, and his body slipped over the face of the cliff while his hands still convulsively clutched the little tree; and there he dangled over the deep abyss, struggling to find a point of rock on which he could rest his feet.

Weasel Wilson, coming up on a run, grounded his rifle as he saw the predicament of his enemy, and watched him with the expression which only undying hatred could give. Rainbow Rube, who came up next, raised his rifle.

"He's got to go, Weasel," he exclaimed. "I've a little marcy in me, ef you hain't."

"Don't fire!" hissed Weasel. "Curse you, Rainbow, do you think I'd miss a moment of revenge for my dead father? Let him die slowly."

"I only hope he'll get away," replied Rube, "and by George, I believe he will."

Velasquez, by the exertion of his tremendous muscular power, had raised himself in such a way, that his face was above the cliff, and holding himself in that position with one hand, he shot out the other and caught the tree nearer to the root. In this position he could get a purchase for his knee, and was slowly drawing himself up, when Weasel brought his rifle to a level. As he pulled, Rainbow Rube threw up the weapon, and the bullet went on a useless mission.

"Snakes an' catamounts," Rube shouted, "give the man a chance. By the holy poker, he shill hev it, ef I hev to warm yer hide."

"If he escapes I call you my enemy to the death," replied Weasel, as he loaded rapidly. Before he could get a cap on Velasquez had planted one knee on the edge of the cliff and was exerting his giant strength to draw himself up, when there was a loud snap and the shrub to which he clung broke, and with a cry of mortal agony, he fell back into the gulf.

"My father is avenged in spite of you!" cried Weasel. "My work is done!"

"I ain't sorry he's rubbed out, nuther," declared Rube, "but it w'd 'a' bin murder to shoot him thar, an' I couldn't stand it. Let's go back."

"I'm with you, Rube. But, now it's over, who the deuce are those Indians that helped us to-night?"

"Spooks!" replied Rube, gravely. "The critters thet made Clear Spring so unhealthy along back. Let's go an' git interduced."

In a few moments they were again in the camp beside Clear Spring. But a great change had come. All about were scattered the bodies of the Mexicans who had been slain, while the captives, bound and helpless, lay upon the grass. The spirit band were there but they too had greatly changed, for the paint had been washed from their faces and they proved to be a band of hardy looking white men. Elegant Ed was at their head and he advanced and spoke to the leader of the young rangers.

"Our work is done here, pards," he said, "and I don't mind now if I let you into a few secrets. These yallow niggers are all safe, I reckon, but leave my men to guard them, and you others come with me."

The boys followed him up the defile, and they reached the brink of the chasm in which so many had mysteriously disappeared.

"It's far more healthy to jump into this place in some spots than others," declared Elegant Ed. "For instance, if I were to jump down here there wouldn't be enough of me left to provide the materials for a first class funeral. I go on a little further and jump down on this shelf and slide into this crack. Here I find a rope with a sliding-board seat, and down I go, lowering myself. Of course, there are some of the boys below to give me a hand, but, standing where we do, you can't see them, because they are hidden by the rocks. We have got these ladders rigged all along the cleft, and can disappear mighty sudden by their means. Will you go down? Show the way, Belle."

The girl sprang upon the shelf, slipped into the crevice, and disappeared. Two minutes later the mellow laugh which had startled the young men on their first night in the pass floated up from below.

"You next, Red Spur," said Ed. "Oh, I trust you more than I did a few hours ago. Something has happened that sets all right. Down you go."

The young man slid down the rope, and the rest followed; but when Dick Merry, who was the third to go down, reached the bottom, Prairie Belle and Red Spur had disappeared, and brave Dick felt a slight pang as he noticed it, for he was more than interested in the noble girl, but he thought that she could choose no better or braver man than Red Spur, and was satisfied. The rest quickly followed, and Elegant Ed showed them how easily, by the aid of friends below, a man could be raised to the top of the chasm.

Then he produced a lantern from a cleft in the rock, and they followed him down the cleft until he turned and plunged into a dark opening in the rocks, and they found after going a short distance that the rocks were honeycombed by natural passages, leading in all directions, and several of them coming out near the spring, but covered by vines. After twenty minutes they entered a large vaulted room, in which were piled a number of small sacks.

"I'll show you boys what I wouldn't show any other men on earth, and you'll understand why we've kept every one out of the pass for three years," said Elegant Ed.

He opened one of the sacks and showed them that it was filled with the precious metal for which men toil their lives out in all quarters of the globe—gold.

"That's it," declared Ed. "I struck the cave by accident and found the vein. I knew it would take years to work it out, and when I had gathered these men about me, we came here and set to work, and thought of a way to scare off other men. These apparitions are got up by us, and you have no idea how far a tight-fitting black suit with a handsome skeleton worked on it in white—that's Belle's work—will go in a moonlight night. See here."

He turned down the lantern so that it gave a dim light and threw on a robe of which he spoke, and although they expected it, the boys

were startled by the apparition, and Ed threw the robe away with a light laugh.

"We've worked the vein out and are going," continued Ed. "There's enough here to buy us all a ranch and stock it; and we've taken up a tract of land over here on the plains this side of Austin, and we'll keep together because my boys won't any of them laugh at me if I am not like other men. Belle?"

The girl, who had been standing in the shadow with Red Spur Ralph, came forward slowly, and Elegant Ed took her hand.

"I had but one brother, the father of this girl," he said, "and now I'm going to own up to the only evil deed I ever did. I wanted to have her with me after her father died, and I knew she was beautiful enough to win the love of some true man, and so I made her believe that there was a shameful story hanging over our family which nothing could efface, and that she must never think of marriage. Hold up your head, girl. The only lie I ever told you I now atone for by giving you to the man you love, Red Spur Ralph, and by swearing that no better or finer woman breathes the air of Texas.

"And if any one denies it," said Dick Merry, "there's not one of my boys but wants his scalp."

"So take her, Red Spur," continued Ed. "It will come hard to part, but—"

"I'll never leave you," cried Red Spur, grasping the hand of the speaker with friendly force. "There's land enough in Texas for us all, and

the same roof which covers me and my wife shall shelter your head, old man."

Few words are need, now. The Mexicans who were yet alive were soundly flogged and turned loose on the prairie, and their horses were used to pack the gold which had been secured by the spirit band. Their last disguise was the work of Elegant Ed and Prairie Belle, who had taken the idea even before the Apaches were plunged into the ravine. Ed was an artist in disguises, and withal something of a chemist, and his men were apt, and by means of this the last of the band of Black Vulture met their fate. It was after the death of Gil Perez that Elegant Ed penetrated the disguise of his niece as Ramon the Runner, and seeing that the work was being done without suspicion he agreed to let her go on, and every step she took was planned beforehand.

When the gold-hunters were ready to depart the last farewells were said, for the mustangers had their work to do, and they rode away to hunt the wild horse while the gold-hunters turned South. Rainbow Rube went with the rangers, for he would not part from the Weasel. They passed adventurous lives, but in the after years the happiest hours they spent were under the hospitable roof of Red Spur Ralph and his charming wife, whom they had known as Prairie Belle. And any who could say: "I was one of Merry's Rangers" was always welcome.

THE END.

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